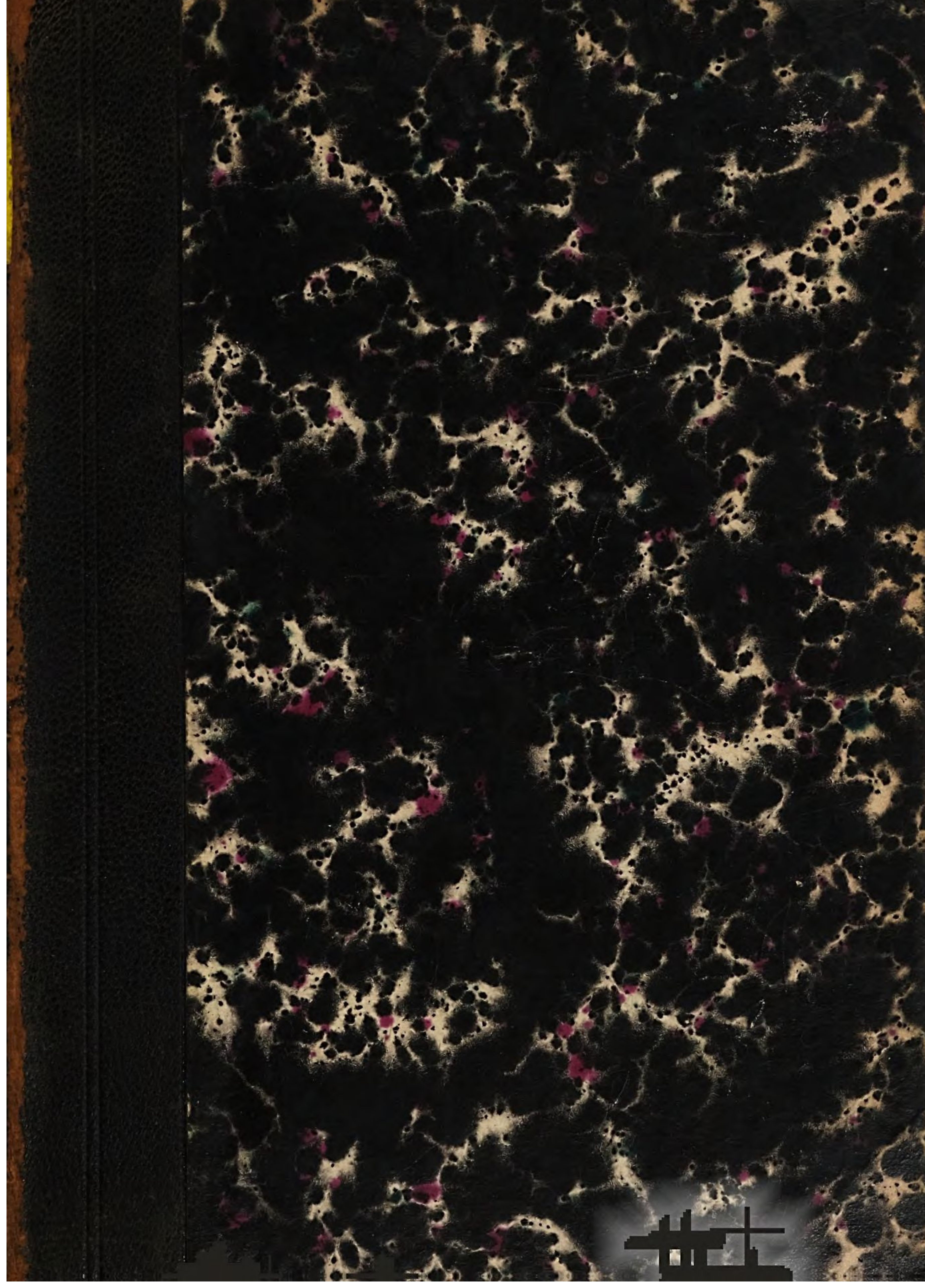




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VOL. 2732.

THE BLACKSMITH OF VOE BY PAUL CUSHING.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. 1.

LEIPZIG: BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ.

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VOL. I.

THE
BLACKSMITH OF VOE

A NOVEL

BY

PAUL CUSHING.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1891.



CONTENTS

OF VOLUME I.

	Page
PROLOGUE	7
CHAPTER I. A dark Horse	29
— II. Below the Belt	44
— III. Invoking Jupiter	57
— IV. Moth-hunting in Winter	71
— V. Rook's Nest	86
— VI. Powers of Darkness	102
— VII. Il Penseroso	118
— VIII. A Man's Burden	130
— IX. At the Hag Stone	148
— X. A Bit of Information	164
— XI. The great Adventure	178
— XII. Dem Muthigen hilft Gott!	191
— XIII. In a green Bower	212
— XIV. Wen Gott betrügt, der ist wohl betrogen	228

	Page
CHAPTER XV. A Conspiracy	242
— XVI. A Naturalist on Spooks	259
— XVII. A Candle-end and a Pair of Eyes	276

THE BLACKSMITH OF VOE.

PROLOGUE.

IT was a hot afternoon in the middle of May. A month earlier, ridges of snow were visible under the stone walls of the uplands of Peakshire.

It had been a long and bitter winter, and now the spring, instead of being the *avant-courier* of summer, of melodious voice, and comely aspect of pink and white, was nothing but a laggard train-bearer in the ashen retinue of winter.

Then, all of a sudden, the mocking traitorous spirit that so wretchedly impersonated the sweet spirit of piping song and shooting bud, and sunshine dashed with shower, was vanquished and driven off in disgrace. Summer came for a few days, not laden with ripening fruits and crowned with shade-giving foliage, but still charged with the vital heat of life. He came just to let the pale-faced, thin-blooded race of mortals know

that he was still alive, and in due time would come and hold his state among them.

But they who waited for his coming as watchers watch for the dawn, were not at all prepared for this impromptu visit. They received him, not with the self-respecting homage of bared head and bended knee, as becomes the free and loyal subjects of a constitutional monarch, but prostrate, like Orientals. They lay down before him, panting and perspiring, overcome by his brilliant presence.

This state of affairs was illustrated on the afternoon in question, by the attitude of Squire Saxton's head shepherd. Vigilant, skilled, and energetic, busy from morning till night, and anything but idle even when asleep in bed, Abel Boden now lay stretched out on the heather, with the upper part of his body in the shadow of an ancient yew-tree.

He was a man of about thirty years of age, a widower with one child, a lad named after himself, Abel. He lived with Dame Cowlshaw, the widow of Dick Cowlshaw, the Squire's late waggoner, who was killed in the wood while hauling timber, two years earlier.

The same took mightily to little Abel, and thought wonders of him.

"If he was my own child, he couldn't have had better intellects. He's only going of five, an' he knows the names of the trees, an' all the flowers in the plot,

an' I'm most inclined to think he can tell which hive a bee comes from," she said with pride to the vicar one day, stroking the curly head of Master Abel, who was hiding his face in her dress.

Half an hour before the shepherd threw himself at full length on the heather, he had met the dame and his lad in search of forget-me-nots, and had carried the child across some fields to show him the young lambs. They came back across the moor, following the half-beaten waggon-track that led from Voe, down in the valley, to Potter's Carr, away up among the hills. Under the yew-tree, that grew on the edge of the long-disused quarry on the moor, Abel sat and played with the boy for some minutes; then the dame trotted off with her charge, and Abel lay down, overcome with the heat.

Below him was the quarry—a deep wound half healed. Many a year had gone by since it was worked, as one could see at a glance: the smooth perpendicular rock was no longer of blood-red crimson as it caught the slanting light of the evening sun, but was of a dull brown, overlaid with great splashes of vivid green. Where the rock sloped or had been left rough, there mosses, grasses, flowers, weeds, bushes, trees,—innumerable forms of life, wild, sweet, and tenacious,—had gathered together, grown, multiplied, and transformed an eyesore into a paradise of untamed beauty. The

hillside all about it was thickly wooded, and through the valley at its foot ran one of the maddest streams in all that land of mad streams.

Above the quarry the heather-land ran as far as Potter's Carr to the left, while the sloping land on the right rolled and twisted itself into rich pastures and golden corn-fields, with many and many a laughing dale that not infrequently put on a sudden look of savagery—startling to the stranger, but to the native nothing but a bit of its humour, a touch of pretty make-believe, like a child playing the bear.

Voe itself was nestled half in and half out of one such dale.

Abel lay on his back watching the almost motionless clouds, that lay against the deep blue sky like great snow-mountains. Presently he heard footsteps approaching, and when they drew near, he raised himself on his elbow to see who it was: not twice a-day did any one cross that part of the moor.

It was with some surprise that he recognised his brother Luke, who was returning home from Potter's Carr, with several empty sacks over his shoulder. Luke was his senior by two years, and was the right-hand man of Miller Duckmanton, who worked his own mill at Voe, and was considered by his neighbours to be a warm man.

For some months now, there had existed a cold-

ness between the two brothers, and they had parted several days ago on the edge of a quarrel. The bone of contention was Alice Duckmanton, the miller's only child, whose nineteenth birthday had occurred on the 1st of May. She was a delicate piece of innocent wantonness, who took to coquetry as a duck to water—as pretty as she was piquant, and as tantalising as she was variable.

Both the brothers loved her, but with a difference. Abel loved her because he could not help it, the silly fellow—being conquered by her brown eyes, her flashes of saucy humour interpolated between passages of gentle sympathy and maiden shyness. Luke loved her with a touch of animal fierceness, remembering always that she was the miller's only child, and, as such, the prospective owner of the mill and a few score acres of some of the best land in the parish.

And she, following the bend of pretty witty devilry native to her, gave her heart to the fierce man, and her open and delusive favour to the mild. Her merry brain had an instinct for comedy, but was quite incapable of realising the tragic abyss that fraternal feud and disappointed passion might create.

“Holloa, Luke! where art going?” cried Abel, in a friendly tone.

“Wum,” answered Luke, surlily.

"I'll come along with you then. It's mighty hot o'erhead," said Abel, getting on to his feet.

"Maybe I'd rather have your absence than your company."

"Well, I'll be hanged if that isna straight! But you never was strong on manners, Luke," said Abel, with a laugh.

Luke elbowed his brother away from him, saying, with an oath, "My manners is good enough for the likes of you."

"All right, Luke; but keep yourself to yourself. I can stand your ill looks and words, being as how we're brothers; but——"

"But what, you soft-tongued rogue? Dost think I'll be baulked by you? Let me hear of you speaking to her again, and I'll thrash you within an inch of your life," roared Luke.

Abel grew red in the face for a few moments; then the blood receded, and his countenance blanched, as shame at the insult gave place to white-hot anger. The mild man was on his mettle now.

"Look here, Luke," he said, slowly, "this has gone so far it must go farther. I shall see her to-night, and I shall speak to her, you may be sure. If you're going to do any thrashing, you'd better do it now—*if you can.*"

For a while the two men clutched and wrestled like

two mad bears—with their eyes. Neither yielded. Then Luke dropped his bags and sprang at his brother. Abel went down plump. Luke had just time to deliver a fine well-planted kick in the quarter thoughtfully provided by nature for that purpose, before Abel was up and on him.

It was not a fair stand-up fight, but a deadly and most irrational hug. Now the hugging power of man is not great, unless he is in a loving mood. Then he has been known to accomplish great things; but, in anger, he cannot hug as a fighting animal should, his ribs being stronger than his arms.

After they had squeezed each other ineffectually for some time, Abel broke loose and cried, "This isna the way to fight. Let's have it out with our fists like men."

For an answer, Luke flung himself on his brother, and the two went at the bear game again.

Presently Abel gasped, "For God's sake, drop it, Luke! We shall be down the quarry in a minute."

"The sooner the better," hissed Luke, with a terrible oath.

There was murder in his tone, and Abel knew it. It was nothing less now than a fight for life. They were close to the edge of the precipice, fifty feet from the bottom at the least. Abel shuddered, and tried hard to force his brother away; but Luke meant busi-

ness, and held his ground tenaciously, while his eyes shone bright and fierce as a tiger's.

"Do you mean murder, Luke?"

"No, lad. We don't murder toads or snakes; we kill them," growled Luke, giving a sudden mighty heft that was intended to do the work.

The strain was too much for him; he slipped and fell on one knee, and lost half his hold. Quick as lightning, Abel put forth all his strength and threw his brother from him. Luke turned a complete somersault over the cliff, and went down with a fearful cry.

For a little while Abel stood like one in a trance, looking at his finger-nails; then he drew near to the edge and looked down. The steep declivity was studded with young trees and bushes, and their fresh green leaves prevented him from seeing far down. He listened, but could hear no sound save that of the rushing stream below.

"Well, if I hadna done him, he would have done me—that's all there is about it. I reckon I'd better go and give meself up to the police."

So saying, Abel Boden turned away and made towards the village of Voe. After proceeding some distance he stood still.

"Nay, I'll go back. Maybe he's not dead, and I can help him if he's badly hurt. May God forgive me the awful deed!" he said aloud.

He turned and ran back as hard as he could.

Arrived at the fatal spot, he stood and called several times, "Luke! Luke! where art? Where art, Luke?"

There was no answer. A great terror came over Abel, the terror of remorse and despair.

"Cast thyself down and die with him," a voice seemed to say: so clear and distinct was it, that Abel involuntarily looked round to see the speaker.

There was no one to be seen. Still the voice spoke, and gave the same deadly counsel. Abel trembled.

"It's the Evil One himself. O God, have mercy on me!" he cried, falling back from the edge of the precipice and sinking on to his knees.

The voice, soft and dreamy and melodious, still sounded in his ears, and Abel thought that death itself would be as sweet as the voice that urged it. Would it? Would self-murder sweeten the bitter issue? "Cast thyself down and die with him." Like distant music lulling one to sleep sounded the fatal voice, and every syllable seemed as a strong cord pulling him towards the brink. He threw himself upon the ground, and clutched the heather wildly with both hands, for he had a sensation of being slowly drawn towards destruction. He lay there for some time, thus physically resisting the devil, and clinging to sanity by his fingernails.

When the voice had been silent for many minutes,

said Abel, "I will go and seek him now. God grant he is yet alive!"

He rose up, and disappeared in the wood to the right of the quarry. . . .

Luke was not dead, nor, for the matter of that, much hurt. Had he been a saint, of course he would have been smashed to death. Had he been an ordinarily good fellow, of fair temper and moderate virtue, there is little doubt that he would have broken a few of his most serviceable bones. Being, however, a fierce, surly, graceless dog, whose freshest virtue was a bit rancid, whose death would have entailed no drain upon the world's stock of sweet humanity, he must needs have guardian imps to bear him up lest he strike his pretty head against a rock.

Falling, he fell across the boughs of a young ash-tree; these with swift intelligence lowered their precious charge into the capacious arms of a spreading yew; while these again let him fall, a little unceremoniously, on to the churlish tops of a clump of thorn-bushes. From thence he reached the solid earth with a bump of an inferior kind, and rolling ten or a dozen feet, finally brought up with his body against a huge stone, that had been busy for half a century covering and padding itself with softest moss for the great occasion.

Only, his face was in a bunch of nettles, and his hands were lovingly clinging to some straggling thorn-

brambles. Brambles and nettles, mistaking the would-be murderer for a good man in adversity, gave forth freely of their peculiar virtue, and riddled him with a quiverful of dart-like pains.

Gathering his scattered wits together, Luke Boden got on to his feet and felt himself all over in a comical fashion. One would have thought he was making sure that he had brought all his members with him on his journey. His hands were bleeding, his face was burning, and his left foot was throbbing with fiery pain.

For his extraordinary deliverance he gave thanks in this wise: raising his eyes and fist apparently to heaven, he exclaimed, "Damn him! I'll be even with him yet."

Whether he was thinking of his brother up there on the brow of the cliff, or of the imperfect protection Old Harry had rendered him, was not quite clear at the moment. Subsequent events, however, suggest that he was thinking of his brother, and not of his father.

Luke Boden was on a shelf of rock, some distance from the bottom, that ran along the face of the slope, and was used by venturesome lads as a short cut between the woods on either side of the quarry. He moved cautiously along this path, which was perilously narrow at points, in the direction of the wood on the right: he knew that a little way in the wood was an

easy path running from the moor above to the bridle-path in the valley below. The pain in his foot was intense, and he sat down to rest.

In a little while he heard his brother calling, "Luke! where art? Where art, Luke?"

He did not answer, looked savage, and swore hard. Presently an idea struck him.

"He'll be coming along here to look for me," he muttered, standing up and looking about him.

A little ahead, the path was not more than twenty inches wide; ten or a dozen feet above the path was a flat rock, forming a sort of table on which were bushes growing. With considerable difficulty, Luke climbed on to this rock and crouched behind the bushes. A tiger in ambush would not have been a deadlier enemy.

Peering through the bushes, Luke saw Abel leave the wood and come along the path; he lost sight of him for a few moments, as the path wound round the rocks. When Abel came into view again he was close at hand.

Softly on his hands and knees crawled Luke to the edge of the rock: immediately below him was the narrow shelf of rock which Abel had to cross. Luke lay on his chest and peered over. He drew back, and lifting a large heavy stone, held it in both hands over the rock for a moment or two, and then he let it fall. It was beautifully timed. Abel Boden went

down with a groan, rolling over and over like a ball, till his poor battered body lay motionless at the foot of the quarry.

With marvellous celerity, considering his condition, did Luke make his way down to his murdered brother. He picked him up on his back as he would a sack of flour, and carried him out of the quarry and along the bridle-path; leaving this, he crossed the rushing stream by some stepping-stones, and ascended the wooded slope on the other side. Panting and sweating, he came to an old lead-mine, where was a shaft full of water, rudely boarded over and partly covered with stones.

A few minutes of hard work and Abel Boden's tomb was ready for him: the body fell with a thud, and the water splashed up. A drop of it lighted on Luke's parted lips. Replacing the boards and the stones, Luke retraced his steps, recrossed the path along the face of the quarry, and limping and sore bruised, came at last to the mill at Voe.

He entered the big old kitchen, sat down in the miller's arm-chair that stood in the chimney corner, and fell into a deep swoon. When he revived, he found himself lying on his own bed—he lodged with the miller—and the doctor bending over him. Now Luke was mortally afraid of doctors, and, when well, contemptuous of their craft.

So now he sprang up in bed, crying, "Am I a-dying, doctor? Am I a-dying?"

The doctor laughed lightly, and gently pushing him back on to his pillow, said, "Oh no, not yet awhile. You are shaken up a bit, and bruised here and there, and you have got a nasty foot, badly sprained; had to cut away your boot to get it off. But you are a long way from being a dead man, or even a badly hurt man. Did you fall?"

"Yes; down the moor quarry."

"Indeed! how did that happen?"

"He pushed me over; wanted to kill me, I reckon."

At this, medicus pricked his ears.

"You were drunk, I suppose?"

"Not exactly; drink isna in my line."

"We've had a deal of rain lately; I suppose the land slipped and let you down?"

"Maybe it did; I reckon I can get up and ride over to Squire Saxton's, can't I?"

"To-morrow perhaps, but not to-day. What do you want with the Squire?"

"Why, I want a warrant out for his arrest, to be sure. A fellow doesn't try to murder me for nothing, not if I know it!"

"Well, well, well; and it is really true then? Who was it?"

"I'd rather not say just yet. I want the Squire," answered Luke, doggedly.

"Very well; I will ride over and see him," said the doctor; and in a few minutes Luke heard the ring of his horse's hoofs on the cobble-paved yard below.

It was late in the evening when the Squire arrived in his dog-cart, accompanied by a member of the county constabulary, who lived in the next village.

"Why, Luke, my good fellow, what is this I hear? Attempted murder! Are you badly hurt?" said the Squire, standing beside the bed.

He was a young man, much about the same age as Luke, with nothing in his build or bearing of the fine old squire—of fiction. Had he been a trifle smarter dressed, he would have passed for a weigher of sugars or a measurer of calicoes. Yet for two hundred years his forebears had been the Squires of Voe, and had driven a roan mare, by which tenure they held their wide estate. His voice would have been sympathetic but for a slight stammer, which rendered it useless as a vehicle of sentiment.

"Yes, sir, I'm badly shook up; it's a wonder as how I wasn't killed, sir. It's all Abel's doing, sir!"

"Oh, come now! I cannot think that. Why, your brother Abel is one of the kindest and gentlest of men, as a good shepherd should be."

"Maybe he is, sir, with lambs and babies and such-

like things. But he tried to kill me, and I want to have him arrested," said Luke, with a touch of fierceness in his tone.

"I'm very sorry to hear it, Luke. It's a serious thing, you know, to arrest a man on a charge like that. He is your brother, you know. Wasn't it an accident?" enquired the Squire, who had a great liking for his head shepherd.

As a lad, Abel had won his admiration by his strange skill in landing trout and grayling with home-made rod and tackle, and his curious knowledge of birds and every kind of wood-lore.

"No, it was no accident; it was meant for downright murder. Some rough words passed atwixt us, then he fell on me and pushed me o'er the top of the moor quarry. He said he'd finish me," growled Luke.

"Well, I am sure Abel is sorry enough now for what he did."

"I reckon he is," quoth Luke, grimly.

"Then you will overlook it this time, won't you?" Luke was silent.

"If I bring him to you, and he says he is sorry, you will, eh?"

"He won't come. He knows he meant murder."

"Won't he, though! It is getting late, but I will drive up to Dame Cowlshaw's and bring him back

with me. This quarrelling between brothers will never do," said the Squire, as he turned and left the room.

He did not see the odd smile that crossed Luke's face as he passed through the doorway.

Squire Saxton, despite his commonplace exterior and impeded speech, was a man who did much to justify his order in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. Everybody admitted he was a just man; and a considerable minority—every man of them a tenant of his—were bold enough to advance the proposition that he was also a generous man. The influence of the Hall was felt in every cottage within a radius of miles, and everywhere it was recognised as an agent of goodwill, brotherly kindness, and the essential refinement of courteous manners and gentle speech.

Squire Saxton was not one of the modern breed who care not a brass farthing whether their people be courteous or boorish, clean or dirty, ignorant or instructed, so long as they drop curtsy and pull forelock to themselves, and vote straight at election times. But then he was suckled and nurtured in the old traditions of squiralty. So now, characteristically and naturally, he busied himself with trying to heal the angry breach between the shepherd and the miller.

In the course of an hour the Squire returned without Abel. His face wore an anxious look.

"I told you he wouldn't come, sir," said Luke.

"I am sorry to say he has not come home. I don't understand it; I think he must be attending to the sheep," answered the Squire, unwilling to believe that Abel had fled the country.

"Nay, sir, he's none tending sheep. I want to have him taken up, sir."

"Perhaps it will be the best way of getting him back again, if he is foolish enough to have gone away. Let me have your story in full."

Thereupon Luke furnished an account of what had happened. It was coloured, not over-brilliantly, but artistically. It might have been a picture of the first Abel, done by Cain the Crafty, son of Adam, after a certain encounter in the fields. It put Abel in an ugly light, and troubled the Squire greatly. If Abel was really guilty, it was better for him to get away out of the country, thought the Squire; he gave him his best wishes in the endeavour, and if he had known his whereabouts he would have sent him his purse as a token. All this was in his capacity of Squire. As a Justice of the peace, it was his duty to uphold the law and punish offenders; and he did his official duty.

Luke's statement was reduced to writing, and read to him; the oath was administered, and then the Squire made out a warrant for Abel's arrest. It was close on midnight when the Squire left the mill.

Next morning, peaceful wood-embowered Voe was

awake early, and terribly excited. Had it been the other way about, and Luke had tried to do the killing, not a dozen people in the place would have been surprised. But that the mild, gentle-natured, humour-loving Abel Boden should have tried to slay his brother, and have fled to avoid arrest, was something to fetch folk out of their beds at daybreak, and make them swarm heads like "flies in vintage-time." The witcraft of Voe would not have been more exercised had a volcano suddenly opened on the top of the Shimmering cliff behind the mill.

Popular sympathy was with Abel, and certain of the Voese went so far as to throw doubt upon Luke's statement. The doubters were mostly young men of not more than fifty-and-five years to sixty, who knew no better. But the Witan of threescore years and ten and upwards shook their sagacious noddles; quoted the Squire, the doctor, and the policeman; enquired triumphantly if the warrant was not out; and meekly suggested that well-behaved boys did not offer opinions to their seniors before they were asked, nor talk of what they knew nothing about.

The day passed and the night fell, but nothing was heard of Abel Boden. On the morrow it was bravely announced by Dame Rumour that three constables, two of the Squire's gamekeepers, and a detachment of villagers were to search the quarry and the surrounding woods.

The news travelled in that semi-miraculous manner peculiar to out-of-the-way places, with a nimbleness almost uncanny. People seemed to spring out of the earth, and come forth from the dark places among the rocks, and swarm around the mill to witness the departure of the band of searchers. Such a crowd had not been seen in Voe for many a day.

The searchers, some twenty in number, were standing near the kitchen door; the crowd held the yard, the steps, the gates, and half-a-dozen waggons and carts; inside, the Squire was having a talk with Luke, when a man left the crowd of onlookers, and pushing past the group of searchers, entered the kitchen and asked to see the Squire. He was a tall muscular man, of about sixty, with iron-grey hair, and dressed in dark-purple corduroy. Everybody knew Nathan Wass the broom-maker, who lived all alone in a dark weird-looking little cottage, built of tufa-stone, on the edge of the wood under the moor.

In a few minutes it was known that he was closeted with the Squire, and the excitement grew intense; for Nathan Wass was a quiet unobtrusive man, reserved as an oyster, who never meddled with business not his own. At the same time, he had the reputation of enjoying something of the luck of famous Jack Horner; and into what pie he put his thumb, from the same he was pretty certain to extract the plum. It was cha-

racteristic of Nathan Wass that, if he appeared at all, he always appeared at the right time, and either said or did something that every one would but no one could.

The crowd waited, wondering what nail Nathan was hitting on the head. By-and-by he came out, and moved away with the band of searchers, headed for some distance by the Squire himself. The crowd hung back, not daring to follow.

Then everybody learnt in no time that Nathan Wass had been a witness of the encounter between the two brothers; he had seen Luke slip, and Abel throw him over the brink. Then Nathan had turned and fled the scene in horror. The crowd murmured, not at Abel but at Nathan. Why should he forge a prison-bolt against Abel the Gentle? Why did not he hold his peace, if that was all he could say? He and Abel had been very friendly together, would take long jaunts in company, and play draughts during the long winter evenings. Confound it! it was not like Nathan Wass to go and do a shabby thing like that.

The searchers were not successful, and no trace of Abel could be found. In the course of a week, information was sent to every police station in Great Britain, and the ports were closely watched; several men were arrested, only to be discharged on examination. One man was remarkably like Abel; but he was not Abel,

only Harry. Weeks, months, years went by without yielding any word, or sign, or token of the missing man.

The dead cannot remember, and the living are often as the dead. Abel Boden was forgotten of the living.

CHAPTER I.

A DARK HORSE.

"GENTLEMEN, it is time to begin business. Gentlemen, I solicit your attention, and would ask for silence."

Rat, tat, tat, went the auctioneer's hammer, on the back of the stout arm-chair upon which he was standing.

The hum of voices ceased, and the auctioneer continued, "I am here to-day, gentlemen, to sell a very valuable piece of property. It will be sold in one lot."

Murmurs from different parts of the room.

"Such are my instructions, gentlemen. The land must go with the house and shop. There is no reserve price. It will become the property of the highest bidder. The house and smithy alone are worth four hundred pounds of any man's money."

Ironical laughter from the crowd.

"Gentlemen laugh! I don't wonder. I meant five hundred pounds, not four."

Louder ironical laughter.

"Oh, I daresay you think, gentlemen, that two hundred would have been nearer the mark?"

"Hear, hear," in a chorus.

"Yes, to be sure; exactly so. But I'm not so green, gentlemen, as I evidently look. My instructions are to sell, not to give away. John Marsden is an auctioneer, not a relieving officer. But the matter is in your own hands, gentlemen; the place isn't worth a farthing more than you will give for it. But this I will say: gentlemen, for a widower, or a bachelor, or a man with economical ideas regarding the size of his family, there isn't a prettier, snugger, neater cottage within a dozen miles of Voe. And then the business that goes with it! Didn't our poor dead friend, known to most of us here from our cradle up as honest Jack Wragg, drive as fine a smithery as you'll find in Peakshire? He made money enough at it. And, gentlemen, remember that honest Jack Wragg left behind him a poor sorrowing widow, with no child to work for her and comfort her in her old age. All her fortune is in this small estate; and with the image of poor Jack Wragg's sorrowing widow before your eyes, who will be stony-hearted enough to say that the place is not dirt cheap at five hundred pounds?"

A dead silence followed this appeal, and the auctioneer smiled a benediction on the group of upturned faces.

"Gentlemen, I knew it would be so," he said, solemnly.

He paused a moment or two, then he continued in secular style, "In addition to house, smithy, and adjoining garden, there are two acres one rood and seventeen poles of land. It consists of two small meadows beside the river Scarthin, and separates the Squire's land from Miller Boden's, who, I am glad to see, is present. Gentlemen, you know the land as well as I do: better grass-land is not to be found in the whole valley of the Scarthin; it is worth a hundred pounds an acre. Gentlemen, what offer do you make for the house, smithy, garden, and meadow-land? Any offer, gentlemen! Start it at anything you please."

"Fifty pounds," sang out a gentleman in a smock-frock, who was well known to everybody, and was not worth fifty shillings in the world.

Loud guffaws greeted this outburst of spirit.

"Fifty pounds; thank you, sir. Fifty pounds only is offered for—sixty, eighty, a hundred, a hundred and—fifty; thank you, Mr. Boden. Is there any advance on a hundred and—sixty, seventy, eighty, two hundred; thank you, Mr. Sims. If the Squire gets it for the money, he—two hundred and ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty—fifty. Two hundred and fifty pounds only is offered for the—sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety; thank you, Mr. Sims. Two hun—three hundred it is, and thank you, Mr. Boden. Going for three hundred pounds; is there any advance on three hundred pounds?

Gentlemen, I must tell you a story—a true story,” said the auctioneer, thrusting his hands in his trousers-pockets, and putting on the well-known comical expression that always heralded one of his famous stock of true stories.

The common room at the Nag’s Head Inn, where the sale was taking place, was crowded with dwellers in and about Voe. The event had been looked forward to with unusual interest for some weeks, during which time it had formed the staple of conversation in the village, and had been discussed from every point of view accessible to local knowledge.

Indeed the discussion had generated no little heat, and had led to the making of a good number of small bets. The smallness of the bets, moreover, in no way diminished the interest in the result. The area of speculation was very limited, the only question being whether Squire Saxton or Miller Boden would be the purchaser. It was conceded on all hands that the contest would lie between these two; the very idea of any foreign competition was excluded.

That there should be a sale at all was a matter to be regretted; for the Wraggs had been the smiths of Voe time out of mind. Honest Jack liked a glass of beer as well as any man in the dale, and now and then, at long intervals, would get a little market pert. At such times Jack Wragg grew mighty proud of his

forebears, and cracked of his ancestry as bravely as a lord.

"My fathers have stood on this hearthstone for over three hundred years. Squire Saxton is a gentleman, and I baint; but I'm better than a hundred years older than he is," he had been known to say, more than once, in his lively moments.

But the line had at last run out, and the smith of Voe would no longer bear the almost official and historic name of Wragg. This was evil enough, forsooth, in the eyes of the natives, and was inevitable. But if the Wragg place was to be sold, of course the miller or the Squire would buy it. And it was equally a matter of course that the Squire's purse was a foot to the miller's inch, in depth; but it was not equally certain which of the two was prepared to dip the deeper into his purse.

Naturally the Squire would like to get hold of that two acres one rood and seventeen poles of land along the riverside; everybody knew that it was a kind of Naboth's vineyard, for which a long line of Squires had lusted. But it was the kingdom, power, and glory of the Wraggs, and they had clung to it with a pride in which there was something royal.

As for the miller, the natives were all sure that he wanted the land, and would run a tight race with the Squire to get it; but there was less unanimity of opinion

as to the real reason why he wanted it. Among the reasons admitted to be probable, and discussed as such, were the following:—

No. I. The miller owned just ninety-seven acres two roods and twenty-three poles of land already; and if you added to this, two acres one rood and seventeen poles more, the result would be exactly one hundred acres. Any one could understand that the miller would like to get the round number of acres, especially as the Wragg land lay next to his own, and was second to none in the parish. The authority for the exact number of acres, roods, and poles owned by the miller was not shown or enquired for: in Voe, folk are not of the breed of breath-wasters, who are all for argument and proof, and will not believe a brick wall is made of bricks till they have run their heads against it.

No. II. The miller did not get on very well with the Squire, and wanted the land to spite him.

No. III. The miller got on very well with the Squire; but there was no doubt he was at heart a Radical, though he professed—no, he did not profess—he was always, like a wise man, dumb on politics.

No IV. The miller was a staunch Conservative, and wanted to strengthen his influence in that direction. Soil is weighty in good honest Tory scales, and many a mickle makes a muckle.

No. V. The miller had a sour gloomy devil in him,

and though he did not care a brass farthing for the land really, it was his satanic whim to oppose whoever did.

No. VI. The miller hated young Abel Boden, Jack Wragg's assistant. It was twenty years ago that the quarrel took place; and his brother Abel had gone off to foreign parts to avoid arrest, and was probably dead now. The miller could not bear the sight of his brother's lad, and had been heard to say he wished him a hundred miles off. It was not the land he wanted, but the smithy. If he once had that, his nephew Abel would never shoe another horse in Voe.

The general hope was that the Squire would get the place; but when it came to the betting, the odds were in favour of the miller. He was known as one who was bad to beat, tenacious in purpose, obstinate in will, dogged in determination. Still, everything depended upon the Squire's instructions to his agent, Mr. Sims; and the prospect of a close contest had produced a state of feeling in Voe that bordered upon excitement.

The auctioneer told his story; it was a good one, altogether too good to be true, but it was too long to be reproduced here. A burst of long and loud laughter, such as many an actor would give a month's salary to provoke, attested its success; then to business again.

The bidding was fairly brisk, though it advanced

chiefly in spurts that rose and fell as if obedient to a mechanical law. For some time, several outsiders contributed to keep the ball rolling, much to the disgust of the natives, who were eager for the great home contest to begin.

One by one the foreigners were silenced and driven off the field; the competition grew narrower and narrower, until at last it lay between Miller Boden for himself, and Mr. Sims for the Squire. The battle had begun. The auctioneer forgot to joke, the onlookers to cough; not a whisper was heard, not a foot was shuffled. All lips were parted and many mouths were open; had the necessary muscles been at hand, every ear would have been pricked.

The figures had mounted up high. Five hundred pounds was the last bid, and Miller Boden had made it. The market value of the lot was already exceeded by a clear fifty pounds, and whoever got it now would pay a fancy price for it. The miller stood with one foot on a chair, in front of the auctioneer, with a stern sullen look on his face. To his left, near the window, was Mr. Sims, smiling a little nervously just now, for he felt that all eyes were upon him.

“Any advance on five hundred pounds? Going at—five hundred and ten pounds.”

A low murmur of applause.

“Five hundred and ten pounds. Mr. Boden, you

will not lose it for ten pounds? Shall I say twenty, twenty? Twenty it is, and thank you. Five hundred and twenty pounds; going at———”

“Thirty.”

Another murmur of applause, at which the miller frowned heavily.

“Thank you, Mr. Sims. Five hundred and thirty pounds; any advance on—come, Mr. Boden, it would be a pity to lose it for a paltry ten pounds. Shall I make it forty? just another ten? Going—forty, and I thank you. Five hundred and forty pounds only” (a laugh) “is offered; going at five hundred and—you have not done yet, Mr. Sims, I am sure; another ten? You will be sorry when it is over—is it fifty? Going, going———”

“Fifty,” said Mr. Sims, and his mouth closed with a snap.

A deep murmur of approval filled the room, and threatened to break out in a ringing cheer.

“Gentlemen, I am offered five hundred and fifty pounds. Going at five hundred and fifty pounds; once———”

“Sixty,” growled the miller, and again that deep murmur filled the room; for his pluck was admirable.

He looked surprised and pleased, and sunk his hands deep into his pockets. But the Squire’s representative thrust his thumbs into the arm-holes of his

waistcoat, and shook his head significantly. He had done. The Squire was beaten and the fight was over, thought the crowd, and something like a great pent-up sigh of disappointment broke forth; those near the door began to move out to spread the news.

"Five hundred and sixty pounds is offered. Going, going, go——"

"SEVENTY!" cried a voice, a little in the rear of the auctioneer; and if a bomb had suddenly exploded in their midst, it would hardly have caused a greater sensation.

The hammer fell from the auctioneer's hand and rattled on to the floor, where it lay unnoticed; while the auctioneer himself turned round in his chair to get a look at the new bidder. The miller stood up and glared at him furiously. Those that had moved out came trooping back, and stood on tiptoe by the door, trying hard to get a glimpse of the stranger.

On every face was depicted wonder, and every man asked his neighbour the same question, "Who is he?"—and each gave the same answer, "Blest if I know."

He was a man who looked a hale sixty, of medium height, dressed in a cut-away suit of dark-blue serge, with a billycock hat thrown back well off his forehead, thus affording a good view of his face. His close-cropped hair was pretty well frosted, but his short thick

beard and moustache were almost the colour of a chestnut. His eyes were grey and of kindly aspect; his nose was doubtless originally a good specimen of the Roman type, but by some catastrophe it had apparently been broken and turned askew; under his left eye was a deep scar, extending across the greater part of his cheek. He was magnificently bronzed, and mellowed as is no human fruit under the sky of Old England.

Another foreign trick—he held a wooden toothpick between his teeth, and amused himself by gnawing the end.

What with oblique nose and scarred cheek, there was a certain grimness in his appearance; but his eyes, genial and humorous, gave away his savagery entirely, and blabbed of the sweet milk of human kindness.

Character always peeps out through the eyes. Every other organ of the body will, upon occasion, lie. The facial muscles will make lying their regular occupation, and carve upon the face most eloquent fictions. But the eye mirrors only reality; therein, if anywhere, is visible the true nature unmasked and naked. Therein one may catch a glimpse of that coy mystery, the soul. The stranger's eyes were his salvation.

At this moment, perhaps the most remarkable thing about him was his exquisite self-possession. He knew the sensation he had made; he knew that all eyes were upon him; he could not fail to hear the buzz of enquiry

and astonishment that filled the room. But it seemed only to amuse him. He was, indeed, conscious of a momentary tingle; but the tingle was pleasant.

Right hand in trousers-pocket, left playing with his beard, toothpick between his teeth, a good-natured smile flitting over his face, he stood easily, and met in turn one-half the eyes that made of him a cynosure.

One of the very best forms of introduction is a good honest look in the eye. Among simple, primitive people, it precedes and almost supersedes speech. And those of the company who met the glance of the stranger felt very much as though they had shaken him by the hand. Also, these were they that formed, on the spur of the moment, a new party, and gave the stranger their sympathy, and straightway backed him in the coming contest with the miller. On the other hand, the miller had his backers; good honest folk enough they were, whose motto was, Voe for the Voese, and who entertained a proper contempt of foreigners.

Presently, the auctioneer got down, and securing his hammer, remounted his chair and continued: "Gentlemen, while there is life there is hope. Faint heart never won fair lady. Only the brave deserve the fair. *Nil desperandum*. Hang on like a bull-dog, etc., etc. Gentlemen, time is going, and our friends here are

both eager to get at each other's throat—I speak in a parable. Five hundred and seventy pounds is offered, —gentlemen, if you have set your hearts upon it, it will be cheap at a thousand. Any advance on——”

“Eighty,” growled the miller, stubbornly.

But the stranger evidently meant business, and without any loss of time called out, “Ninety!”

This seemed to sting the miller; he began to wake up and look sharp; and for some time, amid breathless silence, with no interruption save the verbal repetition of the bid on the part of the auctioneer, the fight went on so:—

Miller. “Six hundred.”

Auctioneer. “Six hundred.”

Stranger. “And ten.”

Miller. “Twenty.”

Stranger. “Thirty.”

Miller. “Forty.”

Stranger. “Fifty.”

Miller. “Sixty.”

Stranger. “Seventy.”

Miller. “Eighty.”

Stranger. “Ninety.”

Miller (with a fierce grunt). “Seven hundred.”

For a moment or two, the auctioneer raised himself from his bent-forward position, in which he acknowledged the bids, and eased his back. The crowd did very

much the same thing; throats were cleared, noses blown, feet shuffled; then silence fell again.

“Gentlemen, another start, and success to the bravest! Seven hundred pounds is offered. Any advance?”

Stranger. “And ten.”

Miller. “Twenty.”

Stranger. “Thirty.”

Miller. “Forty.”

Stranger. “Fifty.”

A long, a fearfully long pause seemed to follow. Perfect silence reigned; but if glances had been audible, there had been a tumult. The miller, with his foot on the chair, with bended head and downward eyes, did not *look* beaten; and yet his ominous silence!

“Any advance on seven hundred and fifty pounds? Once—twice——”

“FIVE,” said the miller, with an upward jerk of his head.

A thrill went through the crowd. The miller had come down to a fiver. He was bending. He was breaking. There was a general catching of the breath in surprise; it sounded like the gasp of a Thor.

“Seven hundred and fifty-five. Any——”

“Sixty-five,” cried the stranger, working the tooth-pick with his teeth from side to side of his mouth, in a manner that said, as plainly as if spoken in Voe

dialect, "Marry come up! none of your fivers for me. We'll fight it out in fifties if you like!"

There was another pause before the miller answered the challenge.

"Eighty," he growled, and a many-folded "Ah!" was breathed by the crowd.

All eyes turned to the stranger. Slowly he drew from his waistcoat-pocket another toothpick, and put it between his teeth; it was a clean, pointed, wiry, unchewed toothpick, and seemed good for another five hundred pounds.

It made several quick passages from one corner of the mouth to the other; then it halted for an instant on the larboard quarter, while its owner called out, "Eight hundred!"

Plump down on his chair went the miller—beaten.

"At eight hundred pounds going, GOING—GONE! What name, sir?"

"Christopher Kneebone," answered the stranger, pulling out of his hip pocket a large roll of bank-notes.

CHAPTER II.

BELOW THE BELT.

OUTSIDE the Nag's Head it was a white February afternoon, cold and cheerless. The sky looked surly, and the air was full of snowflakes, not dry and crisp, but wet and heavy like half-drowned butterflies. I suppose every flake remained true to its scientific character, and assumed the shape of a six-rayed star—every ray the axis of a little world of exquisite beauty. But to ordinary eyes, whose lids were roofs, and whose lashes were spouts running with melted snow, there was nothing visible of this cunning architecture. The beautiful stellar shapes were nothing but vicious white dabs of water, of great sticking power, which suddenly melted into rivers, lakes, and waterfalls, seas, bays, and gulfs, and other interesting bodies of water, all over one's personal landscape. So the crowd, not caring to face the weather in a hurry, now that the sale was over, dispersed itself quickly into the various rooms of the inn, and for some hours discussed the situation, and rehearsed in detail the moving drama of the auction. East and west along the valley, north and south over

the hills and the moors, the tale travelled swiftly and in perfect form. A little golden-breasted romance on wings, it flew hither and thither, and sang its song, and passed like a quick gleam of colour, until the whole country-side was talking of the battle at the Nag's Head.

It was the evening of the day of the sale. In a little cosy sitting-room in a quiet part of the inn, in front of a merrily burning fire, sat Christopher Knee-bone. The tea things had not been long removed, the white cloth had given place to a red one, and in the centre of the table stood a glass lamp of yellow tinge. The chair occupied by the man was an arm-chair covered with horse-hair, and very low; the springs were feeble, and there was a deep sag in the seat, which, however, added to the comfort of sitting in it. When new, the seat had resembled a tolerably stiff ball, on which it would have been an acrobatic feat to sit without the aid of the supporting arms. The man's legs were crossed, which brought his top knee on a line with his chin. He was smoking a long-stemmed pipe of cherry-wood, and reading at intervals the morning *Standard*. Like a potent and jealous spirit, the paper appealed to him with its own peculiar charm, and would not let him rest. Yet the magician was unable to hold his attention for more than a few minutes at a stretch; then the paper would fall upon his knee, and he would

puff slowly, with his eyes upon the ruddy fire. Now and then from afar came the sound of a loud voice or a ringing laugh, mellowed by distance, and muffled by the heavy red curtains that hung before the door. It was snowing still outside; and looking at the window, which overlooked an orchard, one could see the snow driving against the panes, and already piled high up on the sill. The man, catching sight of the heaped-up snow against the window, got up, and putting his face close to the panes, while he cut off the light with his hands, peered out into the night. White orchard; white boughs and black trunks; black wall with white coping; a well windlass and bucket quite white, and three feet of hanging chain quite black; beyond the orchard the Scarthin, a broad black band; a white slope, and then the high hills, steep, covered with firs with white arms and black poles. A wild, sad, dismal, eerie world to look upon. The man shivered with imagination, and came back, and sat enjoying the company of the man-loving and man-beloved spirit of the flame. Presently the landlord came into the room and said—

“Mr. Boden the miller, sir, is outside, and would like to see you for a few minutes, if it’s agreeable to you?”

“Oh yes; show him in,” answered Kneebone, and the landlord retired. In a little while there was a knock at the door, and Kneebone called out,

"Come in." The door opened, and in walked the miller.

Let us take a good look at him as he stands there, in front of the red curtains, the yellow light of the lamp falling full upon him. It is twenty years last May since we saw him on the edge of the quarry on the moor. There are so many unknown murderers walking the earth, that the chances are that we have seen more than one in our time; have probably sat at the same table with one; ridden in a railway carriage together, and through the darkness of a long tunnel. What a sweet sensation we should have had, if we had only known! In the miller's case, we happen to know a thing or two, and so our eyes are wondrous seeing; but if we had not known, it is a question that we should have detected any trace of the murderer in Miller Boden. He has grown stout, and his hairless face is large and red; his brown eyes are very restless. Still, he looks one in the face frankly enough, and his voice is not unpleasant, though a trifle gruff. His manner, like that of most of us, depends upon his temper, and his temper is variable. There is something akin to fate in physical organisation, and certain types of moral character are strangely allied with certain lines of bodily structure. As the difference between a saint and a sinner may be identical with the quality of the liver, so the mental and moral fibre of a man is

determined by certain lines and curves of physical growth. People are easily classified. A few well-known types include most of them. Seeing the individual, we recognise the type; knowing the type, we know fairly well what to expect of the individual, and we are seldom disappointed—for the individual is rarely able to transcend the rigorous limitations of his type. On his face, and for the matter of that, on every square inch of his body, nature had published the fact that the miller's temper was short, fiery, irascible. In a subtler way, she had also notified the fact that a certain element of sullenness and gloom had modified the original quality of his temper. But people pay very little attention to these subtile and vital modifications, of which Nature, however, is so very full and fond. Yet cunning as Nature is in publishing our secrets, there are some that slip through her fingers in a curious fashion. Who would have thought, for instance, that that florid, well-fed man found night a dreadful horror to him? That for twenty years he had awoke nightly with a start, and oftentimes a cry, with the groan of a dying man in his ears? That for twenty years the sensation of a drop of water that had fallen on his under lip had remained with him day and night, burning him like an acid? These were secrets of which Nature gave no sign, or gave it only in hieroglyphics which no one could read. It is just like the

eccentric dame. Let a man from Asia, Africa, or America pass our way, and if he be vain, Nature will write upon him this notice, in universal characters, Behold a Peacock! Our next-door neighbour shall be a forger, a burglar, or a murderer, however, and Nature will keep as voiceless as a giraffe. A comparatively blameless creature sets a whole continent curling its lip, while a monster may pass to and fro like an angel unawares. Not that we would have it understood that the miller was a monster. Gladly would he have given all he possessed to be able to fish up his brother's dead body from the old shaft, and revivify it.

He was a widower now—his wife, the pretty piquant Alice Duckmanton, having been dead a dozen years or so. She had left him with one child, a girl named Ruth, rising eighteen. But for Ruth, years ago the miller would have given himself up to justice, and have suffered what penalty the law might have inflicted. He had not been happy with his wife, perhaps because he felt that he had paid too heavy a price for her; but Ruth was his idol. He loved her, not tenderly and softly, but passionately and fiercely, as a tiger its cub. To an onlooker there was little or nothing that was humanising in the miller's love for his daughter. But then, the onlooker could see only what was to be seen; and in every great love there is much

that is not open to the eye, and there are powers of unguessed good.

Christopher Kneebone had risen as the miller came into the room.

"Good evening, Mr. Boden. Be good enough to take a seat," he said, pointing to the leather-covered sofa, broad-bottomed and springless, that stood against the wall to the miller's left hand.

"Thank you. I hope I'm not intruding, sir? I wanted to have a bit of talk with you about the sale," said the miller, settling himself at the head of the sofa, near the fire.

Kneebone pushed the circular table some distance back, and moved his chair to the other side of the hearth, opposite the miller.

"Do you smoke?" he enquired, as he refilled his pipe.

"Well, I don't mind if I do have a pipe, seeing as how you are smoking. I'm not much of a hand at it, though."

"That's right. What will you have to drink?"

"Hot gin's my drink."

Kneebone rang the bell, and ordered a "church-warden" and a couple of gins; he furnished his own tobacco. Pipes were lighted, glasses touched, healths drunk; then, having duly mounted this social platform of fraternity, conversation was in order.

"Pretty lively time this afternoon," said the miller, puffing in that short, quick, unsatisfactory manner peculiar to the occasional smoker.

"Yes; the company seemed very interested," responded Kneebone, following the remark with a long series of beautiful smoke rings that curved and twisted themselves in every possible shape, as they floated slowly upwards without breaking themselves.

"It's been in the Wragg family, you see, so long. I beat the Squire, at all events; I'm glad of that."

"Was that the Squire's agent, then, that you were bidding against?"

"Why, yes; didn't you know it? That's where the fun came in. Some folks backed the Squire, and some backed me. There's been a lot of money won and lost on the result. Your coming in, though, spoiled the game; no offence, sir, I hope?"

"Not a bit. Sorry I spoiled the game; but I wanted just such a place, and anyway, you made me pay for it."

The miller gave a loud laugh.

"It 'ud never have done to let a stranger, and, if I might so say, a foreigner, come in and walk off with the place for nothing. But bull-dogs understand each other, sir, and when I had tried your mettle, why, dang it, it warn't the money I knocked in to. It was

your pluck, Mr. Kneebone. I knew we could settle the bargain after."

Just then Kneebone picked up his glass, and the miller did likewise; and as a token of extra goodwill and amity, he jingled glasses again.

"Very good of you, my friend; but I wish you had given in to my pluck at seven hundred, instead of eight. It's a pile of good money thrown away, and I've none too much of the precious dirt."

"It's nigh on double its worth, I know; but that's my look-out, not yours. What do you say to a thousand down for it? I know of a place a few miles from here, just as pretty, that can be bought for less than one-half of what I offer you."

Christopher Kneebone sat looking at the toe of the boot he was nursing upon his knee, for some time in silence. At last he said, "You seem to want the place badly, miller?"

"Well, I don't mind saying I do. You see, the bit of land adjoins mine by the river."

"I see. I don't know but what we might come to terms about the land. I should like to oblige you if I could."

The miller coughed, and moved about on his seat, before he said, "It's very neighbourly of you, Mr. Kneebone—very neighbourly indeed; but—well, I want the smithy as much if not more than I want the land."

Kneebone shook his head as he answered, "Sorry I can't oblige you, Mr. Boden; but I cannot. If the land's any good, I'll try and let you have that. But I've set my heart on the smithy."

The miller's red face grew redder. "Why, you are no smith, are you?" he cried, almost savagely. Kneebone gave a slight start and looking keenly at his companion, asked, "What do you mean?"

"I only thought as how you don't look much like a smith. You should have seen Jack Wragg's hands," replied the miller, with a laugh.

Mechanically, Kneebone opened his hands and examined them on both sides. The backs were bronzed and somewhat hairy, but the palms and the inside of the fingers were white and soft-looking. There were no callosities at the roots of the fingers, no grime inwrought into the lines of the hands. In no sense were they the horny hands of toil. Having finished his examination, Kneebone looked at the miller, and with an odd expression of countenance, remarked—

"I don't know but what you are right. They do look in rather prime condition, I confess; but a twelve-month's idleness and plenty of soap and water will do wonders. I guess I can soon toughen them up again, though."

"Then you want the place for yourself, it seems?" said the miller, beginning to think that perhaps he had

been a little too familiar with the future blacksmith of Voe. He had stepped into the shoes of Miller Duckmanton, and to the inherited ten talents had added other ten talents, and was now justly esteemed a man of some substance. And it was not for any smith of Voe—though he was fool enough to pay a fancy price for his forge—to put himself on a level with Miller Boden. But in this crude world, compromise is the order of the day all round; and as the miller had an object to gain, he tactically refrained from any quick assertion of his superior position.

Answered Kneebone, “Why, certainly. I’m not so strong as I used to be, and shall want a good hand to help me; but I’m not here to play the gentleman. They tell me that Jack Wragg’s man is a pretty good hand. Do you know anything of him?”

“Yes, I do; and to tell you the truth, between ourselves, it is on his account mainly that I am anxious about the smithy,” said the miller, moving uneasily in his seat.

“Indeed! I didn’t know that. He’s some relation of yours, isn’t he? Same name?”

“Yes; he’s my nephew. But I’m not over-proud of him. His father had to fly the country twenty years ago; we had a quarrel, and he pitched me down a nasty cliff on the moor. It was a wonder I wasn’t killed outright,” said the miller, in a hoarse voice.

"Has he never been heard of since?" enquired Kneebone, shading his face from the light with his hand.

"No. I judge he's dead by this time."

"And what about his lad?"

"Oh, we don't get on together. I never took to him, and I should be glad to see him leave the place for good."

"I understand. Does he drink?"

"No; but he is a queer fellow: roams about at all hours of the night; pretends to be after insects, and all kinds of vermin; but I shouldn't be surprised if he got nabbed for poaching some day, and serve him right, too!"

"What sort of a workman is he?"

"Oh, nothing to brag of. I could put you in the way of getting as good a workman as him, any day. I shouldn't care for it to be known that I had a hand in it; but if you could see your way to oblige me in the matter, I reckon we could square things in the way of trade."

"If I don't employ him, then, you think he would have to leave the place, eh?"

"That's just it. He is good for nothing but smithery. He couldn't live and grow fat on insects."

"No; they are not feeding. Well, I am glad, very glad, Mr. Boden, to have had this talk with you, and I

hope we shall be good neighbours. I'll think it over about young Boden; there's no cause for hurry in the matter," answered Kneebone. And a little later the miller, with a feeling of elation, took his leave.

CHAPTER III.

INVOKING JUPITER.

THE next morning, after an early breakfast, Christopher Kneebone—over whose identity, courteous and sapient reader, we can afford to let the thin veil still fall—was driven in the landlord's trap to the nearest railway station, a distance of four and a half miles, where he booked through to London. It was a tough journey through the heavy snowdrifts, and more than once Kneebone and the driver had to get out, and with the spades with which they had luckily provided themselves, cut a passage for the horse and trap. It was understood that Kneebone would return in the course of a week or so, when he would begin putting the Wragg place in trim. In the interval, Voe discussed the new-comer pretty thoroughly. It was evident that he had both money and pluck—two things that Voe had a great liking for. The poor are the last to respect poverty, and the timid timidity. The bulk of the Voese were poor and timid, and had Kneebone seemed to be in the same boat with themselves, he would soon

have learnt to his cost what it was to intrude himself into a community where he was not wanted. As it was, he was discussed with the respect that is born of fear, and with the discretion that is said to be the better part of valour. The man who could beat the miller, who had beaten the Squire, was evidently a man that could hold his own and give change for sixpence, blacksmith or no blacksmith. On this latter point there was for some days a considerable difference of opinion. That Christopher Kneebone was a common everyday blacksmith, was scouted by most as an absurdity. What he had been years ago, it was not for them to say; but anybody with half an eye could see that he had not played a tattoo on the anvil for many a year. He had bought the place because he had got the money and the pluck; maybe he had got somebody ready to put into it—maybe he would rent it.

Of old, every tribe had its bard, every clan its minstrel; and there are but few communities, however small and secluded, that have not in their midst a native-born romancist. Voe was no exception to this rule, and now was a fine opportunity for the man with the thin bright streak of imagination. The opportunity was seized, and Voe suddenly found itself, on the third day, tingling with excitement at the report that Christopher Kneebone was simply an agent of Squire Saxton, who had taken this means of circumventing the miller!

The idea was juicy and full of meat, and found favour with many palates. It had been sucked pretty dry and clean, and was ready to be thrown aside like an empty orange-skin, when it was solemnly announced by Am Ende to be "all rot," on the saying of the miller himself, who knew what he was talking about.

Am was the handy man, the Jack-of-all-trades, and typical ne'er-do-well of the village. Seldom quite drunk and never quite sober, his principles were an unknown quantity, and his practices morally piebald. He swore like a trooper, and was credited with being good-natured. No one dreamt of calling him idle, yet he was never known to have done a good honest day's work in his life. Properly handled, he might have developed into a lay-preacher, or a political stump-orator, for he had a glib tongue and an insinuating manner; but circumstances had kneaded him into the clay, and only the mould was wanting to shape him into a most serviceable kind of rogue. He did a good many odd jobs for the miller, whom he served with the fawning fidelity of a low-bred cur. So when Am swaggered up and down the place affirming with many strange oaths that it was "all rot, for the miller was a-going to buy the land of Mr. Kneebone, and had struck his lucky on the bargain," the idea of Kneebone being a secret agent of the Squire died a natural death. And his neighbours, being creatures of prejudice, turned

round on the poor romancist and dubbed him a liar.

Sic itur ad astra!

Certain cynical persons have been known to doubt if there is in nature such a thing as a public mind; but on the whole, it is perhaps the safer opinion to hold that the public has a mind of its own. And when its mind is exercised on any given subject, there springs up within it, like weeds in an ill-tended garden, a magnificent crop of idle stories and sensational reports. If you pull up one weed, another quickly takes its place. This is just what happened in the little section of the great world-mind called Voe. The secret-agent idea being uprooted, its place was occupied by the report that Christopher Kneebone had undertaken not to employ young Abel Boden as his assistant.

Some said this was out of common respect for the miller, whose feelings towards his nephew were no secret; others, that the miller had spoken to Kneebone on the subject; while a third party were cocksure that Abel Boden had been offered the place and had refused it. By the bulk of the natives, however, this last version of the case was looked upon as dogma pure and simple; especially as its adherents, like dogmatists in general, were so cocksure that they waxed wroth or scornful when pressed for proof. But, travelling by different roads, they nevertheless all reached Rome. All agreed that Abel Boden was not going to work for Christopher

Kneebone. With a few significant and a few insignificant exceptions, everybody was sorry at the news; nothing more to the praise of Voe could well be said. For Abel, though born and bred in the place, was very much of a stranger and no little of a mystery to the Voese. He was a capital workman—Jack Wragg would not have kept him a month if he had not been equal to any smith in the valley—but he was never by any chance to be met with in that local House of Commons, the Nag's Head. He was good-tempered, genial, had a nod for every man, and a remark on the weather or a "How d'ye do?" for every woman; the children loved him with their own sweet selfish love. But he had no companions, and worse than all, no sweetheart.

The maidens of Voe, a bonnie brigade—I wish that half-a-dozen of their portraits could have faced this page, for prettier illustrations no writer could desire—said some very hard and cruel and false things about him; but they did not believe a word of it in their hearts, wherein they cockered a sneaking affection for the gentle monster. Of a retiring disposition, shy, and touched with melancholy, people said that he brooded over his father's misfortune.

For some years now, Abel had lived with old Nathan Wass the broom-maker, in the weird-looking cottage built of tufa-stone, on the edge of the wood under the moor. Folk called Nathan old because he was turned

eighty, which Nathan himself thought was a very poor reason, seeing that his back was still straight, and his eyes were undimmed, and his feelings were as fresh and lusty as any young fellow of fifty could desire. Many was the time that Nathan said to young Abel, "Cheer up, lad. Thy father's none dead; he's making money in some foreign land, you may depend on it. Some day he will break silence, and let us know how he's getting along." And for a long time Abel found comfort in the words, and bore up bravely; but as year after year went by, and no tidings came, he began to lose hope, and his heart grew sad, and his spirit melancholy. He withdrew himself more and more from company, sought solitude, and foregathered with the souls of lonely places and the silent spirits of the rocks and the trees. And these threw over him something of their own mystery and gloom. Yet, without knowing it, he was imbibing the best of all tonics, and strengthening the secret roots of his sanity.

The man who as a lad of five knew the names of all the trees and the flowers, and could tell which hive a passing bee came from, was not heading for insanity when he took to the moors and the woods. It looked a bit uncanny of him, after a hard day's work, to set out with his gun and a curious assortment of bottles and boxes, to spend the greater part of the night roaming in the fields and the woods.

The keepers viewed him with no little of suspicion, though his rig-out and general character were scarcely those of a poacher; but though they kept a sharp eye on him at first, they let him alone, for he carried in his pocket Squire Saxton's written permission to carry a gun all over the estate, which took in miles of woodland and moor. This night-hunting after birds and moths and beetles, and all kinds of curious vermin, was something that Voe could not understand; it did not legitimately belong to any sane man's work, much less a blacksmith's. The neighbours wagged their heads over it in a solemn manner; had it been any one else than Abel Boden, they would have wagged their tongues also.

Meanwhile, Abel had revived his passion for woodcraft, and had developed into an enthusiastic naturalist; he made a splendid collection of nocturnal birds, which he stuffed himself—of plants and insects. He studied from nature the principles of the fox, the morals of the badger, and the politics of the polecat. The nuisance was—there was no money in it. If he could only have made it self-paying, he would gladly have dropped his hammer for good, and have devoted himself to natural history pursuits. His inability to do this bred a little bitter root of discontent with his lot; but, on the other hand, his close and loving contact with nature was an antidote to melancholy, and fed his spirit with the sweet and healthful juices of life.

It was a sad day for Abel when he heard the news that was on everybody's tongue, that Christopher Kneebone was about to dispense with his services. He was still at the forge daily, doing bits of work that could not well wait, and keeping the thing going, as it were. Every few minutes, the whole day long, somebody would drop in and express their regret that he was going to leave. One or two of them mentioned the rumour that he had refused to work for Kneebone, and asked him if he had got another place. "Nay, I've not been asked, nor said a word on the subject that I know of. Truth is, I haven't spoken a word to him yet," answered Abel; and in half an hour the whole village knew of his answer. That night Abel stayed in and spent his time rearranging some dried plants. The little room was bright with the firelight, and through the uncurtained window was visible the black face of a steep cliff, with a narrow slip of moonlit sky at the top.

"Thou mustna let it fret thee, lad; for them as talks so much nowadays mostly lie. Why should Mr. Kneebone give thee the sack without trying thee first? that's what I would like to know," said Nathan, puffing slowly his short clay pipe, black as ebony, as he sat in his arm-chair by the fire.

"They say as how the miller has been at him," said Abel, from a stool on the other side of the hearth.

"Happen he has, he's mean enow for that. But he

isna everybody. I, for one, can say as many good words for thee as he can bad uns. And I will, and others will too. Drat him! I'll have a talk with the Squire, if it comes to that."

"Nay, it isn't worth while, Nathan, thank you. I might as well go now as later; he'll drive me out one way or another. I'm afraid I shali feel mighty lonesome and home-sick, though, when I've left the old place."

"Thou art like thy father, lad. He thought as how roaming 'ud kill him. But thou art none gone yet—no, no, thou art none gone yet, lad. Come to that, I can find thee work enow; I've more than I can get through."

Abel shook his head and answered, "That'll none work, Nathan. I'm not up to broom-making, and I'll live by my own hands, if I have to break stones on the road."

"And who wants thee to idle? Not me. I say I can double my trade in a month, if I only get somebody to help me. Thou art o'er-proud lad—o'er-proud."

"Happen I am; but it's in the blood, and it will stay there, I hope. My trade is smithery, and I know what I'm worth at it. I'm not worth my salt outside of it. Ay, if these things would only get me a crust of bread, I'd live on it and be thankful," exclaimed

Abel, touching with his foot a pile of half-a-dozen cases filled with beautiful specimens of insects.

"It's a rich man's hobby thou art riding, more's the pity. But never mind, lad; happen they are worth to thee more than money. They look as how they might be themselves the little devils, black and blue and green, and the Lord knows what colour, that one time made us how they 'ud get into thee and eat thee up. But thou'lt none leave, lad. Come to that, and demme if I don't put a flea into thy uncle's ear that'll bite like an adder!" cried the old man, his face working with passion, while he shook his fist at the fire.

Little more was said on the subject, but it had hold of Nathan, and kept him awake most of the night. The thought of losing Abel, to whom he had become strongly attached, was more than the old man could stand. He had begun by advising Abel not to fret about it, and here he was tossing about restlessly on his bed, and unable to get a wink of sleep, for fretting about it.

In the morning, breakfast over and Abel off to work, Nathan went into the little workshop at the back of the house and began splitting bands for the brooms. He worked two or three hours; then he got up, and locking up the house and hiding the key under the ivy at the end of the workshop, where Abel would be able to find it, he entered the wood that covered the

steep slope in front of the cottage. Twenty minutes later he emerged from the wood on the top of the hill, and, crossing a stile, entered Voe park. Half a mile away, the chimneys of the Hall were visible above the tops of the trees, and Nathan made in that direction. He walked slowly, with hesitation in his gait. He felt he was about to do a bold thing; and though he thought all the world of the Squire, and knew he would be treated kindly, he was none the less nervous. But the mischievous and erratic imp, whose pleasure is to so manipulate circumstances as to thwart and disappoint the expectations and desires of mankind, is sometimes in a genial mood, and plays into our hands with mock beneficence. Squinting through the grey clouds at Nathan, and peradventure noting that he had had eighty years of fun out of him, said imp grew kind, and gently taking the old man by the ear, led him, as it were, into a green pasture instead of a slimy bog. Nathan came to two roads: the one to the left, running over the high shoulder of land, was the shorter way to the Hall; the one to the right, dipping down into the hollow, and running round a thick growth of oak-trees, was the longer way by a quarter of a mile.

Nathan stood still, as if undecided which way to take. Gumption the one-eyed—born guide of blind men—tugged at his left side. Nathan, not knowing who was pulling it, put up his hand and scratched his

right ear; then he bore to the right, and went on towards the oaks—Gumption scolding like a fishwife, Imp smiling like a seraph. Half-way round the belt of oaks, whom should he meet but the Squire, gun in hand and a couple of setters by his side! Poor Gumption fell suddenly dumb.

“Good morning, Nathan. Glad to see you looking so hearty. Are you never going to grow old?”

“Good morning, Squire, and thank you. Happen I shall never feel old in this world, sir, no more than these oaks. I mind them being planted, sir, seventy years ago this very spring.”

“That is a long time ago. Were you by at the time?”

“I was, sir. It seems only yesterday, so to speak. There was the old Squire, your grandfather, sir; and his lady, and a couple of young ladies as was a-staying at the Hall. The Squire, your father, sir, married the prettiest of them. The ladies had little spades with silver handles, and planted every one of them a tree apiece. Young Luke Boden, the miller’s father, had the overseeing of the job; and—if I might be so bold, sir, I’d like to say a word to you about young Abel, the smith, sir?”

“Certainly, Nathan; what is it? I thought a great deal of his father, poor fellow,” said the Squire, putting his back against a tree, and by the same token giving

Nathan to understand that he was in no hurry: a small action, but one the broom-maker thoroughly understood and appreciated. The turn given to the conversation was sufficiently abrupt, but the Squire manifested no surprise. The working of the rustic mind was to him no novelty.

Said Nathan slowly, "It's the talk of the place, sir, as how Mr. Kneebone, the new smith as has bought poor Jack Wragg's place, isna a-going to keep on Abel, sir."

"Indeed! I am sorry to hear that. What sort of a man is this Kneebone? do you know anything of him?"

"No, sir, nought. I saw him at the sale, sir, and he looked anything but a likely man for a smith."

"I hear he has come from foreign parts—America, I think."

"Like as not, sir. Them Yankees are all gents, to their own way of thinking. I've heard as how their last President, as they call him, was brought up a smith, sir. Maybe Mr. Kneebone has been a President?"

The Squire laughed. "Not likely, Nathan, or he would hardly step into Jack Wragg's shoes. Why is he discharging Abel?"

"They say, sir, that Miller Boden has been at him."

"Oh, I see. Well, it is rather mean of a man to persecute his own flesh and blood in that way."

"And the lad never so much as said a spiteful

word agen him all his life. Drat him! if I was Abel I'd give him a downright cussing, and see if it happen do him good," said Nathan, with no little energy.

"I am not sure but what it would do him good," laughed the Squire.

"No doubt on it, sir, if it was only followed up with a taste of good stout ash. Drat it! I'm none too old to do it neither, sir, on occasion."

"Oh, come, I mustn't have you brought up before me charged with assault and battery. Seriously, I have been very displeased with the miller lately. The way he opposed Mr. Sims at the sale was anything but neighbourly."

"Shameful, sir, just shameful. And I've bethought me, sir, as how you might put in a word for Abel, if you would be so kind, sir?"

"How do you mean, Nathan?"

"With Mr. Kneebone, sir. I reckon he 'ud rather oblige you, sir, than the miller. You find him six times as much work as he does, sir."

The Squire looked studiously at the rooks.

"I canna abide to think of him leaving, sir; and you mind what a good servant his poor father was, sir."

"Yes, yes, poor fellow; I'd give something to know what became of him. Well, Nathan, I'll do what I can for him. Good morning." And whistling his dogs, the Squire passed on.

CHAPTER IV.

MOTH-HUNTING IN WINTER.

YEWDALE BRIDGE lies in a hollow, surrounded by high well-wooded hills. From whatever point of the compass you approach it, the town lies deep below you; and in summer, when it is embedded in foliage, it suggests a nest full of eggs. Somehow there seems no sufficient reason why the town should be where it is, and one always comes upon it with a feeling of surprise. It dates from the Deluge; and its market-day is on Tuesday, on which day it collects within itself, as in a natural reservoir, many streams of rustic humanity. In a bee-line it is about five miles from Voe; but as mortals travel, corkscrew-wise, it is nearly seven.

In Voe dialect, it was "markut-day at Yewdle Brig." The snow lay hard upon the ground, and the grey motionless clouds, that had hidden the sun for a whole week, seemed to lie as hard and solid against the sky. It was difficult to retain one's respect for the sun, to say nothing of the moon and the stars, in front of that all-conquering cruel-faced cloud. The pallid shivering daylight had crept timidly for some few hours across the

cruel face, and had vanished at last, like a frightened ghost, down the mysterious slopes in the west, where lie the graves of the Bright Ones. Then darkness sprang forth from its secret lair, and overran the face of the earth.

Through an open door and a low wide diamond-paned window of the miller's house at Voe, came the bright and cheerful light from a roaring wood-fire. It fell in splashes upon the snow in the courtyard, the bright flames bringing out the whiteness as they leapt up at intervals, while the ruddy glow of the fire warmed various snowy projections into a semblance of its own colour. The house stands away from the road, which is some distance below it, and at night it looks as though it were buried in a wood. A steep slope is at the back, covered with pines and larches, and there is a sound of running water among the trees. Taken as a square, the house forms one side, the road below another; the left side is formed of cow-sheds with granaries above them, with the mill at the farther end; on the right side, opposite the mill, is a stackyard, then comes an orchard, and lastly a garden, devoted to vegetables until it nears the house, when it becomes transformed into a sweet medley of fruits and flowers. In the stackyard are five or six ricks, mostly hay, parallelogrammatic in shape, with thatched hip-roofs. Near to one of these stand a man and a maiden. Are they lovers?

The night is raw and biting cold; but the man's hands are not in his pockets, and the girl has not even a shawl over her shoulders, yet both are as warm as toast-and-butter. Does not their temperature betray them? It is too dark to see the features of the girl, but there is light enough from the snow to reveal the fact that she is tall and of graceful figure.

"When do you expect the miller back from Yewdle Brig?" enquires the man, as the sound of wheels crunching the snow becomes audible.

Surely, surely we have heard that voice before, gentle, musical, and touched with melancholy! It is the voice of the gentle monster whose condemnation, in the hearts of the maidens of Voe, is that he has no sweetheart, unless it is some great spotted moth. The girl listens a moment or two to the sound of the wheels before she answers—

"That is not father's trap, it is too heavy. But I expect him back soon. Let us talk about it, Abel. You don't really think that father has had anything to do with it, do you?"

"I am not sure, of course. But it is what they all say. And Am Ende doesn't say nay."

"Oh, I hate him, the wretch! If he is not a rogue, he ought to be prosecuted for obtaining a character under false pretences!"

"You are no friend of Am's, I'm afraid, Ruth?" said Abel, with a laugh.

"He is a cunning, idle knave—that is my opinion of him, and I fancy he knows it is; but never mind him. Abel, you won't think of going away?"

"Why not? Who would fret?"

"Everybody in the place would."

"Everybody means nobody."

"Would Nathan Wass fret?"

"Ah yes! I beg his pardon, dear old fellow. I think he would miss me a bit."

"And nobody else?" asks Ruth, drawing three inches nearer to Abel.

"No, nobody else."

"Oh, Abel, for shame! I should cry my eyes out. I couldn't get on without you now, laddie. You are my all," cries Ruth, with a something in her voice that Abel has never heard before.

A quick, strong thrill goes through him. The lover has ever a fox's eye, and can see in the dark. Abel gives one glance, then he opens his arms and closes them—with Ruth inside. It is their first embrace, and having as yet no idea of economy of force, there is a needless expenditure of strength. Vigour makes up what may be lacking in grace, in this first, sweet, strong clasp of love.

Having half smothered her, Abel murmurs, "Say it

again, darling. Say that you love me, that I am your all. It goes through me like a great gust of life. Say it, sweetheart!"

"Yes; you are my *all*, MY ALL, MY ALL!"

There is another needless expenditure of strength, which is checked of a sudden by Ruth saying in a low quick voice—

"That's the trap coming round the corner! What in the world were we doing not to have heard? Be careful, dearest. Good night."

A hurried kiss, and Ruth speeds along the courtyard and enters the house, as the miller, leaving the turnpike road, slowly ascends the short steep lane leading to the mill.

Meanwhile, Abel has dropped from the rickyard into the thick pine-holt at the side, and going down the hill as the miller comes up, reappears at the point where the lane joins the road. And there we may leave him, for we have seen enough of the gentle rustic naturalist for one night. The scamp!—a pretty kind of moth-hunting indeed!

In the little sitting-room at the Nag's Head sat Christopher Kneebone. He had arrived unexpectedly in the afternoon. While a fire was being lighted and the room warmed, Kneebone went up-stairs and lay down, being tired, as he said, with travelling all night.

It was dark when the maid knocked at his door and said, "If you please, sir, tea will be ready in ten minutes."

In ten minutes Kneebone was down-stairs. The fire, a red glowing mass, was half-way up the chimney; a couple of lamps—one on the sideboard and another on the centre table—filled the room with light. Kneebone stood on the hearth, with his back to the fire and his hands behind him, and made a critical survey of the table. The cloth was spotlessly white, the china was fine, and knives and forks and spoons and cruet-stand shone resplendently. There was a thoroughbred look about the amber-crusted loaf of home-baked bread and the roll of king-cup-tinted butter, while the cream in the large glass jug looked proud and pure. The boiled ham, newly cut into, looked quite coquettish with its sprigs of parsley and bracelet of ruffled pink paper, though it was not altogether successful in its attempt to eclipse the great joint of cold beef, that stood upon the sideboard as if conscious of its rich flavour and mellow beauty. A couple of wee dunce's-caps, worked in pale blue and gold and white shades of wool, attracted Kneebone's attention; he stepped forward and lifted one of them up gently, with thumb and finger, as if it had been a delicate insect. Underneath, in gold-and-white cup, was a boiled egg with a face as brown as a gipsy's skin. Then there were hot muffins, and bright golden marma-

lade, and sundry preserves, whose charms were lost upon the tobacco-loving palate of the hungry creature, whose jaws began to ache with sweet desire. Presently he sat down and began the glad work of destruction. No: we will let the eggs pass, and the marmalade, and the muffins; we will not count the number of slices of ham and cuts of beef; we will be blind to the rapidly attenuating shapes of butter and bread, and it would have been idiocy not to have made hot love to the languishing cream. The man was hungry with a noble omnivorous, and, for a goodly time, unappeasable hunger. And if the victuals had any inkling of their destiny, they were questionless proud of ministering to such a primal appetite, unweakened by any taint of dyspepsia, and right glad to find such a mill to grind them into elements of humanity.

The repast was nearly ended, and Kneebone, who had been going like an express train, was slackening speed as he approached the terminus, when the landlord came in with an air of excitement.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Kneebone, but Squire Saxton would like to see you," he said, panting like a man out of breath.

"The Squire!" exclaimed Kneebone; then he added in a different—that is to say, an indifferent—tone, "Who is Squire Saxton?"

"Why, bless me, he's the Squire, neither more nor less! Shall I show him into the best room for you?"

"No. He is not a king's son, I suppose, nor an angel from heaven, is he?"

"Lors! no, sir; he's a bigger man than that: he owns all round here for miles."

"Indeed! How did he know I had arrived?" enquired Kneebone, slicing a large wafer from the joint.

"He just put his head inside the door and said, 'Hey, Jerry! has Mr. Kneebone got back yet?'"

"'Yes, Squire,' says I, all of a fluster.

"'Will you tell him I should like to speak with him for a few minutes?' says he. And we mustn't keep him awaiting, you know!"

"All right; show him in."

"Not in here, Mr. Kneebone! It isn't the place for him, you know—not with all these things about."

"Ho! Then take him into the bar; give him a pipe and a glass of hot Scotch—you can put it in my bill, you know—and tell him to make himself comfortable till I have finished this joint and picked the bones clean. Then I will join him with a pipe," said Kneebone, slowly and deliberately.

The landlord's under jaw dropped, and his eyes opened wide with amazement and horror. A short sandy-whiskered man was the landlord, with no trace of jolly Boniface about him. Of sanguine temperament, and with a well-developed bump of veneration, he bore the lively name of Jerry Hearse. Yokel wit, which

"keeps the ground and never soars," knew him familiarly as "the Bierman."

"My stars! I'd much liefer jump into the Scarthin!" he gasped, wondering to himself how a quiet and decent-seeming man like his guest could come by such monstrous notions. He looked at the roof, but it showed no signs of falling!—at Kneebone, who continued to swallow and was unchoked! Then the Squire-worshipper called to mind that the mill of the gods grinds slowly but it grinds exceeding small; and he was comforted.

Said Kneebone sardonically, "I have no objection to offer, if you prefer it."

Whereat the landlord seemed a trifle staggered, and reconsidering the position, made answer—

"Happen it'll be better to show him in here."

"As you like," replied Kneebone coolly, as the landlord turned and left the room.

No sooner was the door closed than Kneebone rose quickly and made a dash for the gilt-framed mirror, encircled with yellow gauze, which stood on the mantelpiece. What would have seemed natural enough in a woman, seemed odd in a man, and one who was as free from any trace of vanity as an owl. Arrived at the glass, a woman would have gone through a series of swift and dexterous movements of the hands; she would have touched her hair, her face, her throat gear, her

ornaments, and any bits of lace or ribbon in sight; and every touch would have told for better or worse—for better, if we were betting on it—in the picture of her own sweet self. His little black tie was unfastened, a button of his waistcoat was open, two crumbs were caught like flies in the meshes of his chestnut beard; but Christopher Kneebone did not raise a finger to set himself to rights. Apparently he only gave a searching look at his own countenance, then with an audible sigh he stepped back to his seat, and began afresh the discussion of muffins and marmalade.

The door opened, the curtains were pushed aside, and Jerry Hearse, obsequious as a lapdog, announced “The Squire, sir—Squire Saxton, Mr. Kneebone.”

“That will do, Hearse. You can leave us now,” said the Squire, a little brusquely. If he had his worshippers—and great men, like coins, have their natural parasites—the Squire had no great respect for them or their worship. Hearse vanished like a shot.

Kneebone had risen, and now, with his *serviette* in his left hand, he bowed slightly to his visitor and said, “Good evening, sir. I am just finishing my tea, but that need not interfere with our talk. Will you take a seat, sir, on the sofa? I suppose it is no use offering you a cup of tea?”

“Thank you, but I don’t mind if I do take a cup.

I am afraid I came in at a very unseasonable time, but——”

“No apology is needed, sir. I call their tea tiptop here, which is something remarkable. Good tea at a hotel is as rare as snow in harvest,” said Kneebone, ringing the bell, which was answered in a flash by Hearse himself.

“Bring in another cup and saucer for the Squire, please, and another hot muffin.”

“Yes, sir; thank you, sir; in a moment or two, sir,” said Hearse, retreating precipitately, overwhelmed with the idea of Squire Saxton drinking tea, like any common man, in the Nag’s Head with Mr. Kneebone. He felt that it dignified him, dignified the Nag’s Head, dignified Mr. Kneebone, dignified Martha the maid who toasted the Squire’s muffin, dignified Mrs. Hearse who buttered it; and yet, somehow, it was as wonderful and mysterious as any of the ways of Providence. Indeed it had a real smack of a genuine old-fashioned miracle, thought Jerry; and straightway he had a solemn feeling come over him, and a sense of having been to church.

“Now, Jerry, the muffin is ready, and you mind you don’t go and drop the cup and saucer, which is one of poor Aunt Maria’s blue-and-gold set, and I wouldn’t have ’em broke, not for no money,” said Mrs. Hearse to her spouse.

There was good reason for her caution, for Jerry

was very excited, and moved about very much like a cat on hot tiles.

Kneebone poured the Squire a cup of tea, and said, "You will sugar and cream for yourself, Squire."

"Thank you," answered the Squire, putting a chair to the table and sitting down. He pronounced the muffin good and the tea capital.

"Try another cup, won't you?"

"I think I will, and I will have a bit of that crust with it," said the man of many acres, seizing the bread-knife and cutting off the clean smooth amber crust half-way down the side of the loaf. He cut it into narrow slips, and soaking them in his tea, ate them slowly and with evident relish.

"I fancy you will find Voe rather a quiet little place. You have travelled, I understand?" said the Squire, enjoying the novelty of the situation. He was a man of strong prejudices, and had already taken a great liking to Christopher Kneebone. There is much of the irrational in the likings and dislikings of most of us.

"Well, yes, I'm one of the rolling stones of the race."

"I have known some of those stones to gather pretty well of moss, though, in the teeth of the old proverb. I hope you are one of them. Been to India, may I ask?"

"No, sir, I am sorry to say I have not, but hope to

some day. New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the States have been my camping-grounds."

"A pretty wide pasture to feed in. I suppose you are tired of roaming now, and have chosen Voe to go to sleep in?"

"That's about it, sir. There is no grass so green nor sky so blue as Old England's. Many a time I used to think that my poor ghost would be restless and unhappy, if I was not buried under English sod. Curious, sir, how English folk, who go everywhere and do everything, and scutter about the world like rabbits in their native warren, yearn for Old England like babies for their mothers' breasts," said Kneebone, with an accent of personal experience that was almost pathetic.

"Yes, come to think of it, it is funny. How do you account for it?"

"Don't know there is any accounting for it, unless it be that there is so much of the land in us, and so much of us in the land."

"How do you mean?"

"Supposing that there had never been a funeral in England, never a grave dug from John-o'-Groat's to Land's End, but, from the Romans down, every dead body had been thrown into the sea or carried to some foreign land. There would have been an immense quantity of human dust missing, there would have been so much less soil in the land, and what there had been

would have lacked something it has got now. We live on the soil, sir, and we have put hundreds of millions of tons of sacred and beloved dust into the ground, and mixed it like a leaven in the earth. And somehow I fancy there's a kind of blood-kinship now between us and Old England."

"A pretty theory, at any rate, Mr. Kneebone. I don't know that I exactly follow you or go with you. Singular notion rather, but at bottom there is something in it, no doubt. In some way it seems to put a touch of life and affection into the land; and, come to think of it, why, the land's chock-full of it," said the Squire.

"Chock-full of it, sir! Town men don't know it, maybe, but country men do."

"Ha! you like the country, then?"

"Well, yes. I've seen a lot of town life in my time, but—the country for me. It is my Jerusalem, which I prefer above my chief joy."

"I am glad to hear it, Mr. Kneebone. It is a mark of sanity. I should have thought that you and young Abel Boden would have hit it off together very well. He is quite a naturalist, I believe."

"You mean Boden the smith?"

"Yes. There is some talk, I believe, of his leaving the village. I should be very sorry indeed for him to go away. Don't you think you could manage to keep

him on? They say there is not a better workman round here for miles."

Kneebone hesitated for a while before he answered, "I'm sure the young fellow ought to be much obliged to you, Squire."

"Not at all. I do not like to see a decent lad like him unfairly used. I understand there are those who would be only too glad to do him an ill turn. And I believe in fair play."

CHAPTER V.

ROOK'S NEST.

"THAT'S English anyway, Squire. I should be sorry to do Boden an injustice. Of course he is nothing to me, and all I want is a good reliable workman. What is this story I hear about his father having to fly the country?" enquired Kneebone, resting his knife and fork upon the plate and looking hard at the Squire.

"It is an old tale, and was a very sad piece of business. I have always regretted that Abel Boden didn't come back and give us his version of the story. I'll never believe that he deliberately tried to injure his brother. The miller says that he flung him over the cliff. Perhaps he did; I have no evidence to the contrary, and the miller was certainly badly bruised. But the question in my mind is, was it not done in self-defence?"

"There were no witnesses, then?"

"Yes, Nathan Wass, the broom-maker—I don't know whether you have met him?"

"Yes, I have seen him, I believe."

"An odd man, rather lonely in his ways; was meant

for a hermit, I fancy, only hermits are out of date. But he is a thoroughly veracious man, and he said at the time, that he saw the struggle from the wood. He was not prepared to swear who began the conflict, but he hinted pretty clearly that it was not our shepherd. You must understand Abel was my head shepherd."

"Oh, indeed! Then you knew him, did you?"

"Better than I knew my own brother."

"He was about my age, wasn't he?—I mean, he would be about my age now."

The Squire bestowed a critical glance upon Kneebone's face and replied, "Hardly. I should judge you are not far from sixty, while Abel would not have been more than fifty-one or two at the outside. We were both much of an age, and as lads were together a good deal. He taught me how to throw a line, set a wire, lime a twig, find a nest, catch a squirrel, and lots of other things. His woodcraft was first-rate. It was from him that young Abel inherited his taste for natural history. I wish he would give up smithery and turn gamekeeper, then I could look after him better."

"Rather fiery in his temper, though, was the shepherd, wasn't he?" said Kneebone, who seemed almost eager to learn all he could about the long-missing man.

"Fiery! As mild as his own sheep. Like his son, he was of a singularly gentle disposition,—pensive

rather than melancholy. If he got roused, somebody would catch it; but it took a great deal to rouse him. How the miller can continue to cherish a grudge against his brother's son, I do not understand."

"I am afraid he doesn't waste much affection on him."

"There is one thing to be said: the miller has never been like the same man since the day his brother disappeared. He has a dark spirit now, morose and surly. Once he was sound in politics and religion, but of late years—but there, I forget you are a stranger. I am glad to know you, Mr. Kneebone, and though I haven't your promise, I feel sure you will not work against Boden, whatever you may decide to do."

The Squire had risen, and Kneebone did likewise. The latter stood stroking his beard in silence for some moments. At last he said—

"Squire, they will say I've done it to please you. I don't care a red cent what they say for the matter of that, but I don't wish folk to think meanly of me, at the start, if I can help it."

"I understand you perfectly," said the Squire, with a quick flush and frown. "We are fallen upon evil times: people still believe in their idols, but they are ashamed of their honest belief being known. So they mock in the market-place what they worship in the

wood. It is a note of progress, I suppose, and of course you believe in progress, Mr. Kneebone?"

"Down hill? Oh yes, sir. I'm bound to. I see it going on all round me. But what I was going to say is this: if I keep on young Boden, I don't want you to think, Squire, that I have done it just because you asked me. You will excuse me, sir, I know, but I mean that if the tables had been turned, and you had been trying to do the mean thing by the young fellow and the miller the fair thing, I should have sided with the miller, sir, if you had been the Duke of Peakshire himself."

"I believe you, Mr. Kneebone," laughed the Squire, "for his Grace is not a formidable man at all. 'And as far as that goes, my forefathers were Esquires of Voe when his were simple wool-merchants with a growing trade."

Fine and beautiful was the subtle change of inflection that occurred during this statement of a simple fact of comparative history. It is not every day that one hears the genuine accent of a more than ducal pride, and he is a man of a million who can pit himself with delicate scorn against a live duke and live. An odd world, my masters! Full of little creatures whose breath is in their nostrils, and who dream dreams that would put a modest seraph to the blush. The

Squire had hold of the handle of the door, when Kneebone said—

“One moment, Squire, if you please. I understand that you would have liked that bit of land down by the Scarthin?”

“Well, yes,” said the Squire, coming forward, “I should have liked it very much, but I wasn’t prepared to cover it with gold. I would give double its market value any day for it.”

“That’s about what I gave for it,—not that I wanted the land, only it went with the house and shop, and I meant to have them at any price.”

“Do you mean you will sell it?” asked the Squire, eagerly. The ambition of a century seemed about to be realised.

“I thought at one time of letting the miller have it, but not now, not for a thousand pounds. You may have it, Squire, and welcome. I like a man that believes in fair play.”

Out went the Squire’s hand, and, meeting the blacksmith’s, a hearty shake followed.

“Thank you, Mr. Kneebone, thank you very much indeed. You have done me a very great favour. I like your disposition more than I can say, and I am right glad to have you settle among us. Mr. Sims shall call and settle about the transfer and what not. Put your own price on the land, and you will find that

the Saxtons have long memories, and are never ungrateful." Having so said, the Squire left Kneebone alone.

"I believe it, though he did stammer over it. The Saxtons have long memories, and are never ungrateful. Ah, well, they don't raise 'Esquires of Voe' in any country except Old England, and if they are dying out here, it's a darned shame, as cousin Jonathan would say," soliloquised Kneebone, getting his pipe and ringing for the table to be cleared.

The Jack Wragg place stood in about the middle of the village, on pretty high ground, with a glorious outlook. But blacksmiths in general, having something else to think about, would not give an odd sixpence a-year for the most glorious outlook in creation. There are exceptions of course: Jack Wragg when in the flesh—and the spirit—would stand and look at the magnificent expanse of hill and dale, wood and meadow, river and sky, and the slopes of the climbing uplands, for a whole minute together; and lifting his bare brawny arms would remark to himself, if no one else was within speaking distance, "Blest if there's a prettier picter outside o' heaven!" For which oft-repeated sentiment he was labelled "Heavenly Jack."

The cottage was built of stone, with a thatched roof and overhanging eaves; in front there were two lancet-

windows down-stairs, and two semicircular ones upstairs, which gave a distinct character to the place. It was approached by ten or a dozen steps, was surrounded by a garden that might well have been a section of the original Eden; the whole being ringed in with a thick neatly trimmed thorn-hedge. A stream ran through the garden, and on one side of the house was a noble elm-tree. The smithy was on a line with the road lower down the hill, adjoining the garden. It was completely sheltered by another elm of great age and size and vigour. Exceeding pleasant to the eye was the sight of this ringing hive of industry, at the foot of the old tree with its lofty and wide-reaching branches. There was something idyllic in smithy and cottage embedded in a superb landscape. One called to mind the words of Evelyn: "Here my cousin William Clanville's eldest son showed me such a lock for a door, that for its filing and rare contrivances was a masterpiece, yet made by a country blacksmith. But we have seen watches made by another with as much curiosity as the best of that profession can brag of; and, not many years after (1654), there was nothing more frequent than all sorts of iron-work more exquisitely wrought and polished than in any part of Europe, so as a door-lock of a tolerable price was esteemed a curiosity even among foreign princes." And remembering that hammer and anvil had been the instruments of a fine and

beautiful art, one was tempted to envy the lot of the blacksmith of Voe.

In the course of a few days there came from the great city, seventy miles away, a band of workmen, including masons, bricklayers, carpenters, painters, and plumbers. They were put up at the Nag's Head, and the next morning, headed by Kneebone and the gaffer, marched up to the cottage, followed by a wondering troop of Voese,—men, women, and children. The spectators, however, were not allowed into the garden, and had to content themselves with standing at the gate, watching the movements of the workmen in front of the cottage, and exchanging ideas on the subject of Christopher Kneebone's sanity, wisdom, and wealth. As all of these points were open to controversy, and were more or less involved in doubt, the sole medium of unanimity lay in a fluctuating and semi-sarcastic scepticism. The workmen, meanwhile, were busy inspecting in their idle-seeming way the quaint little structure they were to operate upon. When they first stood in front of it, in a group, they looked at each other, and broke out in loud laughter. They had thought they were in for a big job at some fine house in the country.

Carpenter. "I say, Bill, this is a fine mansion, ain't it?"

Plumber. "In the Hitalian style."

Mason. "Th' picter-gallery's at the back. Where's the ball-room, Jim?"

Carpenter. "Never you mind. 'Tain't open for inspection, only on visiting days."

Mason. "Dunna you see it's part of a old habbey? Look at th' winders."

Plumber. "How many on us will it hold at once, Jim?"

Carpenter. "Two on us wi' our coats off—one upstairs and as many down."

Plumber. "We'll form a percession, and go in one at a time, eh?"

Mason. "We mun go out by th' back-door, or we'll get wedged agen one another."

Plumber. "Let's lift it on to a barrow, and wheel it back to town, and show it off for a penny a-head as a big bee-hive."

Carpenter. "An owl's nest, Bill, 'ud do better than a bee-hive, with you inside for th' howl. The boys 'ud never find out the trick."

In this wise they shot their pellets of good-natured contempt at the little brown-faced architectural dwarf, who bore it all silently, gravely; while its two semi-circular eyes, gleaming with sunlight, shone brilliantly, wisely, serenely, from under its overhanging brow. It did not strive with its dumbness, nor desire to lift up its voice and cry aloud. Its thoughts were centuries old; and long contact with humanity had

transformed it into a thing half human, and touched with gentle pity for the infirmities of the race. There be many of these dumb sympathists in the world, though we make small account of them.

After all, there was not much to be done at the Rook's Nest, as Kneebone christened his cottage. The painting and papering and whitewashing throughout was a light job, although it had to be done very thoroughly, and with no little taste. As the workmen came to understand the quality of work that was required of them, they were more contented. Somehow the wee place caught them with a guile all its own, and changed the group of scoffers into warm admirers. Modistes divide women into two classes—those who set off their dresses and those who do not. They adore the first and despise the second. House-decorators will tell you that as it is with women so is it with houses: some will respond to every touch of the brush, and yield beautiful effects that strangely outrun the conscious effort of the workman. It is as if they had a subtile spirit within them that was only too glad to seize the opportunity of working unobserved, and of hiding its magic under the formal labour of a mechanic. While other houses, on the contrary, seem to be organically graceless and stubborn, work against the workman, and defy his best efforts to conceal their constitutional sluttishness.

Rook's Nest was a little thoroughbred, instinct with the spirit and the love of loveliness, and wore its new favours as sweetly and bravely as any house of high degree. The workmen—shrewd readers of architectural character—quickly discerned the quality of its temper: its soul was clean, docile, and apt; nothing was lost or thrown away upon it; it lent itself with mysterious facility to their best work, which seemed to mellow from day to day into something better than their best. They grew to respect the little place, to love it, to be proud of it. They put their soul into their work, to the huge astonishment of their gaffer and—themselves. It was the only use they had made of their soul for many a day; and selves and gaffer were no little taken aback to find how *a touch of soul* enhanced the market value of their work. It was like finding nuggets of gold in one's own garden. But they had small faith in their soul. They looked at their first bit of really *human* work, and doubted if they could keep it up, even if it fetched in the open market half-a-crown a-day extra.

At the back of the house they built a small room, which Kneebone was having fitted up with bookcases let into the wall; above this was another room finished as a bath-room. When it got wind that Kneebone was a reading man and was building a library, the astonishment was universal and profound; but when it leaked

out, a few days later, that a bath-room was also in the course of construction, wonder gave place to anger, ridicule, and contempt. Fancy Jack Wragg bemeaning himself to use a bath-room!

"Them o'er-clean folk be mostly knaves. The cleaner the outside the dirtier the inside. A bit o' honest dirt was aye a token o' piety among my forbears and all good Christians," were among the authentic apophthegms of the lamented Jack Wragg, and were sympathetically understood of the people.

That the Squire and his lady should find a bath-room useful, was not to be wondered at or cavilled at; it was their nature, and went with the hall, and the crest, and the roan mare, and other notes of squiralty. In Christopher Kneebone, the foreigner, however, it was a very different matter, being nothing more or less than a reflection upon the ancient manners and customs of the Voese. A fine blacksmith he was, to be aping the ways of the gentry! Was he in reality a blacksmith?

A beautiful bone of suspicion to pick was this. It gave rise to a warm discussion that waxed into a fierce controversy. Oddly enough, the dispute narrowed itself down to the condition of Kneebone's hands: some said they were the hands of no smith, being white and soft; others as stoutly maintained that they were neither white nor soft. As it happened, Knee-

bone's hands had undergone a remarkable change during his ten days' absence after the sale. Miller Boden would hardly have recognised them; they had lost their idle look altogether, and bore the marks of genuine labour. It was a small point, but it carried the day in Kneebone's favour; the more so that it was generally felt that they had done him in thought a great injustice.

The controversy was cresting itself, just when it became known that Abel Boden was going to stay on at the forge. It was a very opportune piece of news, and weighed well for Kneebone in the scales of popular favour. It was generally spoken of as a backhander for the miller, and there was a widespread curiosity to know how he took it. Am Ende, the miller's parasite and mouthpiece, was attacked in the oblique native manner by half the village, but every effort to extract the desired information from him was unavailing. He swore, laughed, frowned, snapped his fingers and slapped his thighs, drank all the bribing glasses of beer to which he was treated, but to pump him exceeded native wit.

This reticence, in one who was loquacity incarnate, deceived many but not all. The Witan of the place shook their white heads gravely, and declared that the miller was "feeling badly bit." In his fury he was like unto a bull of Bashan, and he could nurse his fire like

a smoking mountain. Sooner or later he would be even with the book-reading, bath-loving foreigner, as sure as wheat was wheat.

A rumour of all this came to the ears of Christopher Kneebone, but he only laughed and said, "Let the miller run the mill, and the smith the smithy. This is a free country, and if I like I'll take on Old Harry himself, and teach him to shoe horses, let who will say nay."

This was brave speech, better even than anything reported of self-sufficient Jack Wragg. Voe heard it, and first looking round to see that neither Miller Boden nor Am Ende was in sight, laughed silently and approvingly from ear to ear.

A fortnight passed away, and with it the wild heart of March. The snow had gone altogether, save for the ridges under the upland walls, and the mounds in the hollows in the woods. It was wonderful how green and fresh the earth looked, now that its face was once more visible. It was a fine frosty noon when Christopher Kneebone came down from the cottage, where he had been watching the men at work, and set off for Yewdle Brig. He wanted to order a pair of big bellows for the smithy, the old ones having shown signs of impending dissolution. They had been put up in the time of Jack Wragg's father, getting on for fifty years ago, and had been mended so often that very little of

their original composition remained. If Jack Wragg had not been in heaven, the old bellows would have been botched again; for the idea of getting new bellows was as foreign to him as that of getting new biceps. The new man brings the new world: Kneebone would have thought that sixpence laid out on the patched and odd-looking monster was so much money thrown away.

Kneebone did his business, and was on the point of starting homewards, when it began to snow heavily. The sun went down in a clear sky, however, scattering its red arrows among the snowflakes with miraculous chromatic effect. Kneebone, thinking that the storm was nothing but a bit of wanton frolic on the part of an isolated and irresponsible cloud, turned into the "Pig of Lead" and ordered a tea of ham and eggs. Still the snow came down thicker than ever, and the fiery west had hooded its splendour in grey and ghostly gloom. Kneebone left Yewdle Brig *inter canem et lupum*. It was a mile nearer across the fields, but he decided that it was wiser to keep the road. The twilight died away almost suddenly; according to the almanac there was a well-filled moon in the sky, and doubtless the almanac was correct, though not a ray of lunar light worked its way through the vast awning of cloud that seemed to be fast to the tops of the hills. Half-way home it ceased snowing, the wind fell, there

was a strange calm, a weird silence, and darkness sevenfold thick was on the ground and in the air.

Christopher Kneebone was not a nervous man, nor superstitious, but as he stood on the top of the long hill leading down to Voe, and listened, hearing no sound of living thing, only the low breathings of the solitary hills hidden in the darkness, and unearthly "sounds of undistinguishable motion," suggestive of the non-human spirits of air and woods and mountains,—his sense of awe deepened into spiritual terror. Well as he knew nature and her myriad moods and innumerable costumes, never before had he seen her in such sable attire, in such attitude of mystery; motionless, silent, dumb, as though smitten dead with a sudden great vision of God. Kneebone drew a long breath that sounded like a deep sigh, and began to drop down the hill. It was so dark that he could barely make out the road. He was nearing Voe, and had reached the curve in the road some little distance above the mill, when he drew up suddenly, as a colossal black figure seemed to rise out of the earth and bar his way.

CHAPTER VI.

POWERS OF DARKNESS.

"Hallo there! who are you?—a man or an elephant?" cried Kneebone.

"All right, stranger. It's as dark as a bag. How far to Yewdle Brig?" said a gruff voice.

"A good six mile, friend. Nasty night for walking."

"Been on the tramp all day, stranger. Happen ye have a copper to spare for a night's lodging?"

"Sorry to say I haven't got a copper on me. If I had, you should have it and welcome," answered Kneebone, moving aside.

"Got any siller on thee?"

"Silver do you mean?"

"Ei mon, siller or gowd 'ull do," said the black monster, contemptuously.

"Well, yes, I've got just as much silver and gold about me as I—mean to keep," replied Kneebone, in a significant tone. He had never yet seen the man he was afraid of, and the fellow's tone was insolent.

As he spoke, Kneebone's hand glided to his hip pocket, which contained his purse and a small silver-hilted six-shooter, once the property of a former friend of his. Said friend distinguished himself in England by studying medicine, shooting without a licence other people's game, and slaughtering for his own amusement certain of my Lord Muchland's beautiful red-deer; then, following the star of empire, he moved quickly west, and from a cow-boy graduated with honours as a cattle-lifter and horse-stealer, and finally, on the Mexican border, flourished as a brigand chief. Dead now? Oh no; such gentry are in no hurry to die. Within a day's ride of Granada is a delightfully situated monastery that looks a worthy home of clean-lived saints. Before a golden shrine, arrayed in gorgeous vestments, is a stalwart priest, with a tan upon his face that no asceticism can bleach. It is the brigand chief turned monk! That man's "Life" would knock the best romance out of the market, and here you have it, dear reader, in a nut-shell.

To return to our lamb cutlets: Kneebone's hand was on the revolver that had once belonged to the heavenly-minded monk. The unknown laughed at Kneebone's words and said—

"All right, stranger. It's too dark to quarrel, or I'd put some steel into you. Good night." He moved on

up the road, and in a dozen steps all trace of him was lost in the darkness.

Kneebone continued his journey, but had not proceeded more than a hundred yards when he heard the unknown calling out, "Say, stranger, have you got a match on you?" He felt inclined to push on and pay no heed to the request, but second thoughts, kindlier if not wiser, prevailed, and he called out, "Yes, I've got a match on me. Where are you?"

"Blest if I can make out where you be," answered the unknown, whose voice sounded close at hand.

Kneebone turned to meet him, and as he did so, out from the wooded hillside sprang two black figures, and rushed upon him. It was evidently an ambush, and, remembering the sinister words about steel, Kneebone thought his life was in danger. He sent out a great cry of "Help! help! murd———" He fell on one knee, half stunned by a murderous blow from a thick stick. Before he could rally himself, the three men were upon him. They seized him violently, and seemed to be pulling him in all directions. For some moments he was too dazed to offer any resistance, and was only conscious of wondering to himself whether they would know where to strike to kill him with one blow of the dagger. But instead of stabbing and robbing him, they began to thrash him mercilessly with sticks, at the

same time showering fierce oaths upon him—which, however, broke no bones—and abusing him for a foreign prig and damned Yankee swell, who was meddling with matters that did not belong to him. They were giving him a taste, a plum of the pudding to which he would be treated liberally in the future, if he did not get out of Voe bag and baggage.

This put a new light upon the matter. Kneebone's giddiness vanished; his faculties were in perfect order, and his blood was up. He was not going to be rattened into a jelly, if he knew it. With a sudden desperate effort, he planted his foot like a battering-ram on one fellow's stomach, and sent him flying backwards. Of course, a soft guardian angel in the form of a grassy bank must be in the right spot to receive the flabbergasted villain, and prevent him from splitting his dear skull upon the hard road. With the delivery of his stroke, Kneebone sprang to his feet, the other two hanging on like bull-dogs. He sent out another loud cry for help, as he felt that they were trying to throttle him. The spirit of murder was awake now in the hearts of his assailants. Kneebone felt it distinctly in the devilish clutch of their brawny hands. A shiver ran through him as the flabbergasted villain on the bank, recovering himself, sprang forward and muttered to his mates, "Hold him tight, and I'll finish him wi' my knife." "Mind yo' hit the right 'un," one of the

couple gasped breathlessly, as they rolled about the road in a life-and-death struggle.

Kneebone's strength began to fail him; his head swam, and though he was fighting as men only do when they know it is for dear life, a fatal dizziness was creeping over him. Suddenly he became aware that a fifth figure had intertwined itself in that fierce serpentine coil of humanity, though his assailants did not yet realise it. Undetected in the darkness by the others, Kneebone felt its touch half-a-dozen times on various parts of his body, and each time a strange thrill went through him. Once its hand was upon his face, over which it moved quickly without attempting to close. It did not once speak, nor could he hear it breathe, though the others were panting loudly. Was it friend or foe? Was it man or angel? Kneebone trembled, but his strength grew. Whole stores of strength were unlocked, so that for a moment he fought himself free.

In that moment the figure was by his side, and whispered, "Who are you?"

"Christopher Kneebone."

"Ah!" Then in a loud voice he cried, as the villains closed upon him, mistaking him for Kneebone, "You knaves, I know you!"

As though they had suddenly been confronted by a row of fixed bayonets, the rogues fell back bewildered.

"Look out, Tim; it's the devil himself!" muttered one of them, in an unmistakable tone of horror. Then they turned and fled, two towards Yewdle Brig and one towards Voe.

Leaning with his hand heavily upon Abel Boden's shoulder, Christopher Kneebone drew his revolver and fired down the road at a venture. The bullet found its billet. A dreadful shriek rent the air. But the next moment the footsteps of the flying villain were distinctly audible, a pretty sure proof that he was more frightened than hurt.

"If I had only been as smart as the man to whom this shooter once belonged, one or two of those villains would have played an important part at a funeral, I am thinking," remarked Kneebone, as he put the weapon back into his pocket.

"It is better as it is. It's a terrible thing to take a man's life, even in self-defence. Are you hurt much?" enquired Abel.

"I'm a bit bruised maybe, but no bones broken, thank heaven! My lad, you've saved my life this time; they meant murder, if ever men did. I'll bear it in mind, lad, that I owe you my life."

"I'm downright glad I happened to hear you call out, Mr. Kneebone. I was down by the mill, and I thought I heard some one shout 'Help!' I started up the hill and listened, but could hear nothing. It was

so dark I could make nothing out. I stood for a while, and was just thinking of going back when I heard you call out again. Were they footpads, do you think?"

"No, lad, they were none footpads. They were ratteners. They let the cat out of the bag when they began thrashing me."

"But they weren't Voe men—two of 'em, at any rate," objected Abel.

"How do you know that?" asked Kneebone.

"I felt their faces and hands."

"So did I, for the matter of that: fingers aren't eyes, though, lad," laughed Kneebone.

"They will tell as much as eyes, though, any day; at least mine will. Two of them were foreigners, as we say round here. I am not sure of the one that went down-hill. I fancy I know his face well enough."

"Who do you think it was? Let me know, lad, and I'll teach somebody a lesson they won't forget in a day."

The two men had reached the point where the lane from the mill joined the road. Said Abel, "It was just here where I first heard you call out. I was——"

"Hallo! what's that?" cried Kneebone, as a small stone fell in front of them. At the same moment there was a slight movement in the plantation on the other side of the wall.

"Oh, nothing of any account," answered Abel, as he stooped, and picking up a pebble, jerked it lightly into the wood.

The two went forward a few yards, and then Kneebone said abruptly, "Who is she?"

"Who is who?" enquired Abel, in a tone of surprise.

"The lady in the wood; your lady-love, I suppose?"

"I don't quite catch your meaning, Mr. Kneebone."

"You don't mean to say it is your cousin, Miss Ruth Boden?" said Kneebone, halting and laying his hand on Abel's arm.

"I didn't know I had said it was any one, Mr. Kneebone. If the miller heard my name connected with that of his daughter, there would be trouble, I'm afraid—especially now, since things have taken the turn they have, sir."

"Well, well; it has taken me by surprise, I'll admit."

"But I have admitted nothing, Mr. Kneebone," put in Abel, a little defiantly.

"Certainly not. And you will be—— Look here, lad; you have saved my life this night, and I shan't forget it, you may depend. We must be friends, close and true friends, eh, Abel? I may call you Abel, as though you were my own son, mayn't I?"

What was it that sent a sudden rush of emotion over Abel, bringing him in an instant nearer to tears than he had ever been before, except when thinking of his father in some of his pensive moods? Perhaps it was the subtle ring of sympathy in Kneebone's voice and words.

"I have no father, as you know, Mr. Kneebone. And I am thinking none can ever fill his vacant place. But—yes, call me Abel, and we will be true friends. I'm shy at making friends, but—I like you. I can trust you. You shall be my friend," said the young man; and their hands met in the pact of friendship.

"Friends through thick and thin, Abel! On the subject of your lassie, I'm dumb from this moment. Some day, when we know each other better, you will tell me all about it. Now, to go back to what we were talking about: who was the ruffian you recognised?"

"I think I'd rather not tell you just yet, unless you wish it very much. You see, I'm not sure, and it might make trouble," replied Abel, in a hesitating manner.

"No; it shall make no trouble, till we are quite sure of our man. Do you think your uncle had a hand in it, Abel?"

"Why do you ask?" inquired Abel, quickly.

"I don't know, I'm sure; unless it is that I know he is sore because I have kept you on. Strange, isn't it, how he hates you?"

"Yes; and cruel as strange. I've given him no reason to, that I know of."

"You are the son of your father; I suppose he thinks that is reason enough. You remember your father, don't you?" said Kneebone, in a low voice.

"Yes; in a confused sort of way. I've only one clear memory of him. I remember him lifting me up on to his shoulder; he was standing on the edge of the quarry on the moor, and I recollect feeling afraid as I looked down. It seemed an awful distance to the bottom. I believe I never saw him again after that."

"Was that the day of the quarrel?"

"Yes; so I am told. I was scarcely five at the time."

"And you have never heard of him since?"

"Never. I don't know whether he is living or dead."

"I guess you would like to hear, though?"

"Like to! I'm not much of a praying man, and maybe I don't bend my knees as oft as would be good for me; but bending or standing, I judge, is much one to our Maker. And God knows that, for the last fifteen years or more, not a night has gone but I've prayed that the morrow might bring tidings of my father. I've about lost hope now," said Abel, in a thick voice.

"Nay, lad, keep a stout heart, and hope on. I'm not much of a prophet, and don't much believe in

prophesying, unless I know; but somehow I feel sure you'll get tidings of him some day. You may bet on it, lad, he hasn't forgotten you. You see, if he had sent word to you for a time, and then have dropped it, there would be some ground for thinking he was dead. But unbroken silence, I take it, means that he is still alive and well, and biding his time to turn up. Anyhow, it's a comforting theory, and I'd advise you to hang on to it for some time longer. Never be in a hurry, lad, to believe that Hope is dead. You might as well fret for your own funeral. Will you come in a bit?"

They had reached the Nag's Head by this time, where Kneebone was putting up.

"Not to-night, thank you. How do you feel now?"

"A bit shaken, lad, but nothing serious. A good night's rest will put me all right, you'll see. You didn't answer my question about the miller?"

"I'd rather not, to-night," answered Abel.

"All right; but I'll keep my eye open in future. I'll let him know to-morrow that I've promised the land along the river-side to the Squire, and see how he likes that. Good night."

"Good night," answered Abel; and turning away, he retraced his steps to the foot of the lane leading to the mill. He stood against the wall bounding the plantation for some little time, seemingly occupied with his

thoughts; then he put his hand to his mouth and sent out a weird *hoolie-gool-oo-oo* that smote with terror every field-mouse that heard it, and was enough to haunt with fearful dreams the last spell of a frog's long sleep. The echo of the brown owl's cry was still in the air, when the wail of a plover came from the plantation, which was answered by Abel with the low boom of a snipe. Then he vaulted the wall, and diving into the plantation, like one who knew every inch of the ground, he climbed the hill and came to a ring of firs about a stone's-throw from the rickyard at the mill.

On a jutting rock in the middle of the open space sat Ruth. She had an amber necklace in her hands, and amusing herself with fingering it, seemed to be telling her beads. The wind had risen, and the torn clouds were moving away in two layers—the upper layer slowly and sullenly, and the lower swiftly, in many a fantastic vaporous form.

As Abel entered the circle, the moon sailed out of the scowling darkness and threw its clear pale light upon the girl, who rose to greet her lover.

"Why didn't you wait for me below?" said Abel as he stood in front of her, holding both her hands.

"It was very foolish of me, I know, but—well, I think I was a bit nervous," answered Ruth in an apologetic tone.

"That is something new, sweetheart, isn't it? What made you nervous?"

"Oh, never mind it now. You would only laugh at me if I told you. Tell me where you have been and what has happened."

"Not till you have told me what frightened you," persisted Abel.

The girl hesitated a while, and then she said, "While I was waiting for you to come back, a man came running down the road, and turning up the lane, he jumped over the wall into the plantation, and crouched down as if to hide himself. There were only a few bushes between him and me."

"Did he see you?"

"No; I kept perfectly still, wondering what on earth it meant. He did not stir from the place until you went by with—Mr. Kneebone, wasn't it?"

"Yes. What then?"

"After you had turned the corner to cross the bridge, he got up and went into the road, and—and—stood and—shook his fist at you," said Ruth, nervously.

But Abel only laughed low and said, "You kitten! I'm afraid of no man's fist."

"Oh, but, dearest, you should have heard him! He cursed you horribly, and swore he would have his revenge if he swung for it. I thought I should have fainted with terror."

"Poor child! if I'd only known, I would soon have been with you. Try and forget all about it," said Abel, with great tenderness, as he drew the trembling girl close to him.

"He will harm you, my love. He swore he would. What have you done to him, Abel?"

"I don't know that I have done anything, unless—— Do you know who it was, Ruth?"

"Don't you know, Abel?"

"Not for certain, but I can give a pretty good guess. Was it Am Ende?"

"Yes, it was Am Ende. He is a dangerous man to have for an enemy. What have you done to anger him, dearest?"

"Well, I haven't done very much as yet—unless it was to prevent him from having a hand in a cowardly murder. I found him and a couple of unknown villains doing their best to kill poor Kneebone. If I hadn't turned up when I did, I make no doubt they would soon have throttled him."

High-spirited and full of mettle, there was no braver girl for miles round than Ruth of Voe; but Abel felt her tremble as he spoke. She saw no more perhaps than he did, but infinitely clearer. Her imagination was more nimble and realistic, and future events, that were for him a blurred mass, had features cut like cameos for her.

“Oh, Abel, my laddie, it bodes no good, I am thinking, for us! But we will be true to each other, won’t we?” she murmured, with a ring in her voice that sent a thrill through her lover.

“Trust me, darling; I have nothing else to live for—now—but your love.”

“Nay, nay, don’t say that, my love. I know what you are thinking; but you are wrong. He will come back one of these days, and then—then I shall grow jealous of him, father or no father.”

“Oh, Ruth, Ruth! but for you I should have gone mad, I think. And sometimes even now I feel as if my heart would break when I——” He paused, and struggled painfully to overcome his emotion; but the effort was useless. And as his feelings swept over him in an irresistible flood, he raised his hands to heaven and sobbed out piteously, “O God, God, Father and Mother God, give me back my father!” His hands fell; his uplifted face, full of sad and melancholy beauty in the brilliant moonlight, drooped earthwards, while a sound, half groan and half wail, fell from his lips.

Gently did Ruth draw him to the cropping rock, and thereon seated, she took his head upon her bosom, and stroking his face softly, crooned over him as a mother over her troubled child. After a while Abel sat up, and shaking himself, said, “I am ashamed of myself, Ruth, for letting my feelings get the better of

me like that. It is bad enough when I'm alone, but before you——"

Ruth put her hand to his mouth and stopped him, saying, "Before me? Am I not your own? Your grief is my grief, and your hope is my hope. You must let me share all your trouble, Abel, if I am to share your joy."

"Ah, lassie," murmured Abel, as he drew her close and kissed her, "you are well named. You take after the sweet woman of old. Think you, was it some one who loved her—a lover or a husband—that wrote the story in the Bible?"

"I never thought of it in that way," answered Ruth, with a soft love-filled laugh of gladness; "but perhaps it was. It was just like a noble husband to go and do a thing like that. Only in that case I'm afraid he flattered her a bit."

"Happen he did. It's no new taste in women to like sweet things, and no great harm, as I know of, to humour them a bit. See this," said Abel abruptly, pulling out of his pocket a big brass button of a peculiar pattern.

Ruth examined it carefully and said, "I know who wears buttons like this."

"Are you sure?" enquired Abel, seriously.

"Yes. Am Ende does."

CHAPTER VII.

IL PENSEROSO.

"I GUESSED as much. If I let Kneebone know, there will be trouble, Ruth. It's a bad piece of business altogether."

"You don't think father had anything to do with it, do you?" asked Ruth, in a startled tone.

"I'm afraid he had. And what's worse, Kneebone suspects him."

"But why? Why should he suspect father of doing a terrible thing like that?"

"He puts it down to the miller's rage at him keeping me on."

"Yes, father is very crossed about it, I know. I never saw him like he has been the last few weeks. But he wouldn't do anything wicked like that; I am sure he wouldn't, Abel," pleaded Ruth, with a dim uneasy feeling all the time that she was going moral bail for her father to a degree that was only justified by her filial relation.

"I'd rather think with you than not; but the thing

has an ugly look about it. Am Ende would hardly dare to do it on his own account, I'm thinking."

"Promise me you won't tell Mr. Kneebone anything about Am Ende! It would kill me, Abel, if father had to go to prison."

"Nay, don't you go and frighten yourself on that score. The miller is no fool, Ruth. He will take care of his own skin, you may be sure. If any one suffers, it will be Am Ende; and your father could easily make it right with him."

"Oh, Abel, I don't like to hear you talk like that. You speak as if you were sure of father's guilt," said Ruth, a note of reproach in her voice.

"Whatever I may think, Ruth, be you sure I shall do nothing to injure your father. He has done all he could to injure me, as you know, without cause on my part; and I'm going to take my revenge along the old line of doing good for evil. I cannot forget two things, my sweetheart: in the first place, he is your father; in the second, he is my father's own brother. No, lassie, I can't even bring myself to hate him, let alone to hurt him."

A singular moral creature, it must be confessed, was this young blacksmith-naturalist. Anything but a conventionally religious man; anything but a coward. Brave, indeed, as a lion, only in a quieter and more

human way; did not *roar* his bravery, like most lions, human and otherwise; but acted it, with an instinct worthy of a gentleman. Though he would have laughed, in his gentle ironical manner, had any one been foolish enough to dub him gentleman. He believed in the Church more than in the creed of the Church, and showed his respect for the Church by seldom entering it. A bit of a sceptic, too, having caught, as it were by accident, a passing breath of the spirit of the age; but he took the complaint in no virulent form, but mildly, not to say reverently. It seemed to aromatise his personality with a subtile and sweet odour. In a large and vital sense he managed to embody the curious radical kinship of *skeptikos* and *episkopos*; terms which—he was only a blacksmith, you remember—we dare not English for the life of us. A singular moral creature was this moth-hunting blacksmith, acting like a genuine Christian at times when genuine Christianity was in order, and thinking pagan thoughts six times out of seven!

As Abel declared his inability to hate or harm the miller, Ruth, being a sweetly impulsive creature, threw her arms about her lover's neck and kissed him. It was a rare human reward for a rare human virtue; it made it seem worth while to cultivate unusual virtues, though they are very costly things to grow. Ruth was a tall girl. Abel stood over five feet ten inches in

height, and he had to bend his head but very little to receive the reward of virtue.

"You are a dear good fellow, quite too noble for a commonplace girl like me. But I will try and become more worthy of you," murmured Ruth, her heart full of pride in the moral nobility of her lover.

"I am no more noble, sweet one, than you are commonplace. And as for trying to be better than you are—don't. A fine fruit is content to grow naturally, and mellow with time. You will get warped and out of proportion if you take to trying. It is the method of inferior natures, Ruth," said Abel, veiling a serious belief under a tone of lightness.

"Do you think I shall ever mellow into a fine woman?" enquired Ruth, almost shyly, yet with a touch of passionate earnestness.

"Do I? Why, sweetheart, you are already a fine woman, though a young one. All you have to do is to mellow. God grant it may be under a clear sky and a kind sun!"

Whereat the tears came into the girl's eyes, and she said softly, "Dearest, you are as the sun you prayed for me. You give me hope and strength."

Said Abel with a sigh, "I am very glad if it is so. It's curious, though. I should have thought I was the last fellow on earth to give to any one hope and strength—articles I'm mighty short of myself."

They sat for some time in silence, before Ruth said, "What sort of a man is this Mr. Kneebone, Abel?"

"You have seen him, haven't you?"

"Yes; I don't mean in looks, I mean in character. Tell me something about him. Is he an interesting man?"

Abel laughed and said, "Well, yes, he interests me. I don't know him very well as yet, but from the little I know I like him mightily. I don't think he is much of a blacksmith, though."

"Why?"

"He doesn't know how to handle a hammer yet. He says it is because he has been idle so long. But I'm thinking it is because he never learnt how. He seems to have knocked about the world a good deal. Some day I'm going to try and draw him out a bit."

"Is he a very reserved man?"

"Yes; we are much of the same kidney as far as that goes. He's made a pretty place of Rook's Nest, as he calls it. He is going to have quite a library, I believe."

"Oh, won't that be nice! If he has only got some books on birds and moths and beetles and wood animals for you to read, and perhaps a few novels which you could borrow for me."

"Not much chance of that, I'm thinking. Goodness knows what his taste will run to in the reading line!

That he should care to read at all, is more than most folk can understand," said Abel, with some contempt in his voice.

He knew only too well himself what it meant for a man to have a taste or pursuit that was not shared by, or familiar to, the good people of Voe. It meant no little abuse and ridicule, or, at the best, a scornful pity that disdained concealment.

"Do they talk much about him now?" asked Ruth, who knew perfectly well that Abel's sympathy would go with any man whose honest eccentricities had brought upon him the sour looks of his neighbours.

"Talk! their tongue's a razor, and they use him as a strop to whet it on. But it's all behind his back now, mind you. He gave them vitriol for their vinegar, and they're afraid of him now."

"Violet Chalk says he is very rich," remarked Ruth.

"I should have thought Violet Chalk was too shrewd a woman to talk nonsense. I don't say he isn't rich. All I say is this: he never told anybody he was rich, I am sure of that; it isn't his style at all. And he is the village blacksmith. Put the two together, and I say it's all nonsense to call him a rich man. He may be, but nobody knows, and the odds are against it."

Ruth had no doubt that Mistress Violet Chalk had been guilty of talking arrant nonsense, since Abel had

said so, and said it almost severely. Still, she was kindly disposed to the nonsense—liked it better than the sober sense of her lover. A rich blacksmith would have been a novelty, a delicious anomaly, a living romance, she thought. Fond of pungent flavours was she, and life was apt to be lacking even in the common table-salt of variety. This same sensibility of her moral palate was one of the active causes that had led her to fall in love with the very man her father most hated.

“But he can’t be a very poor man, or he wouldn’t have thrown away his money as he did at the sale. I heard father say himself that, if he was not a rich man, he was a fool,” she said, willing to justify herself in the eyes of her lover.

“That puts him in an awkward box, I’ll admit. In that case, we had better hope that Kneebone is—which is it to be? Rich man or fool?” laughed Abel.

“Oh, rich by all means.”

“Then, indeed, is he a fool to carry on a blacksmith’s forge in Voe. Poor fellow! the argument seems against him whichever way the wind blows. Yet he is no fool; or if he is, fools are scarcer than I had thought.”

“Do you think you will get on well together?” asked Ruth.

“Oh yes, first-rate. He seems inclined to let me

have my own way in everything; and I seldom quarrel with a man who will do that."

"It is because he knows you are to be trusted, dear. I am so sorry that he and father are at cross-purposes. I should so like to have known him. I'm sure he is a nice man."

Abel made no reply for a while, but stood in an attitude of thought, leaning against a tree. The moonlight was on his face, and so was Ruth's glance. It was hardly the face of a blacksmith and the son of a shepherd. It was a delicate, smooth, dark-skinned Italian face, of an oval cast, with melancholy grey eyes, a finely wrought nose, and a beautiful mouth and chin. He had a moustache that a Guardsman might have envied, for silken texture and wavy length; his head was a mass of rings and wheels of short black-brown hair. If he could have kept his hands out of sight, he might have strolled along Fitzjohn's Avenue and been taken for a foreign artist. Yet he had not an atom of the artistic faculty in him. He looked a thorough Southerner, subtle, sleek, supple, insinuating. A guitar seemed to become him infinitely better than a smith's hammer. He was one of Nature's cunning mockeries—one of her finished and heartless ironies. On the face of it, there was something akin to stupidity in fashioning such a peg for such a hole. And as if to cap the absurdity, and at the same time puzzle be-

holders, Nature had deviated from her fixed practice of subordinating the style of character to the physical type. For Abel was neither subtle, nor sleek, nor supple, nor insinuating. His mental man was thoroughly English, and was simple and honest and straightforward enough to have found an adequate expression in a moon face, a ruddy complexion, and mutton-chop whiskers.

Leaning against a fir, with the moonlight on his poetic face, Abel looked the very embodiment of *Il Penseroso*, the Pensive Man, lover of Divine Melancholy, gentle-hearted friend of Sorrow, sweet-voiced acquaintance of Grief. And, to this extent, he was what he looked. To Ruth his face was a grand living picture, rich in strange beauty and romantic suggestion; she was never weary of looking at it. Oddly enough, she had scarcely ever yet seen it save by moonlight, or starlight, or twilight, or by the broken lights of evening. She longed to see it in the open daylight, illuminated by the glorious sun; but so far, their loves were known only to themselves and Ruth's former nurse, Violet Chalk. And so their meetings had been all in secret and under cover of the night. It was singular what a strong desire the girl had to see her lover's face by daylight. Yet it was a face that lost rather than gained by the light of day; its pensive sadness, its dark, colourless beauty, gathered tone and har-

mony from the dim lights and deep shadows of the night.

Just now Ruth was looking at him, and thinking how much she would like to see that noble face and head bathed in a flood of brilliant light, that would wash away from her mind all sense of dimness and obscurity, and bring her nearer to him than she had ever yet been able to get. Now that the days were lengthening and summer's herald was at hand, they would surely be able to plan a meeting in the sunlight. She would place her lover full in the sunshine, and bid him forget her and think about badgers or beetles or what he liked best, and she would stand close by and study his countenance, and fill her soul with images of its unusual beauty, its fascination, its pathetic melancholy. From this sweet dream she was recalled by Abel saying——

“Lassie, Mr. Kneebone has made a discovery.”

“I hope it is a pleasant one?” she answered, in a far-away tone. She was disinclined to lose sight of her pleasant dream, which already was dissolving like a distant rainbow.

“I hardly know whether it is or not,” said Abel, in a tone that effectually banished from the girl's mind, in a second, all thought of the face in the sunshine.

“What is it, dear?” she asked anxiously.

“He has guessed our secret, sweetheart, that is all.”

"Oh, Abel, what do you mean?"

"He has guessed that we love each other. Not a bad guess, either, is it?"

"What in the world can we do? If father should find it out now, it would be terrible, Abel. Two months ago it would have been different, but now—Oh, Abel! how did it happen?"

"Don't be frightened. Kneebone knows which way the wind blows. We've pledged our friendship for each other this very night—he says I saved his life, and happen I did. He's the sharpest-witted fellow I've seen for many a day; once on the scent, he went at the game like a shot. I'm not sorry, on the whole. If we should need a friend, I'm thinking he would stand by us like a man."

"There are two know it now. True, I told Violet Chalk myself, but isn't somebody else as likely to guess it as Mr——"

"Hush, hush!" whispered Abel, quickly, taking Ruth's hand and retreating into the deep shadow of the firs. Crouching low behind some bushes, they listened—Ruth with a palpitating heart.

A heavy footstep was distinctly audible at a short distance from them. It moved forward slowly, its track being marked by the sound of crackling leaves and snapping twigs. Peering into the darkness, Abel presently made out a sight that startled him. It was the

figure of a man carrying on his back something that looked fearfully like the body of a dead man.

Instinctively Abel put himself in front of Ruth, while the figure moved out of sight. Then he said, "You had better run in now, darling." Silently they kissed each other, and then lightly and swiftly as a fawn did Ruth tread her way to the rickyard. Something in Abel's voice had struck terror to her heart.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MAN'S BURDEN.

THE store-room at the mill was a long narrow apartment on the top storey, with heavy rafters overhead, and lighted by a window at each end; sacks of unground corn stood against the walls and covered the floor, leaving only a narrow passage down the centre of the room. On a sack, near the window overlooking the courtyard below, sat Miller Boden on the evening in question. It was dusk when he left the house, stick in hand, saying, "I am going out for an hour or two, Ruth." Ruth thought, as the miller wished her to think, that her father had gone down to Voe on business. He was often out of the house at night,—a fact that had proved very favourable, so far, to the two lovers. But to-night, as soon as he was out of the yard, the miller turned back and entered the mill by a side door that had purposely been left unfastened. He left the door loose as he found it, and passed up, first a flight of wooden steps which led into the grinding-room, and then up a sort of flat-runged ladder into the store-room.

A mysterious time-killer is thought. A thousand years would seem as a day to a painless being, neither hungering nor thirsting, who lost all consciousness of self in the deep abyss of thought. He had been there over an hour, yet it seemed but a few swift minutes to the miller, when he heard a light step crossing the courtyard. Putting his face close to the cobwebbed window, the miller looked out. The yard was white with falling snow, and threw out in strong relief the tall willowy figure of Ruth. The miller watched her pass through the gate and into the lane, then the shadow of the trees hid her from view. He wondered what took her out at that time of night, and in the snow. A new idea struck him suddenly, and he cursed the snow. Presently he drew back from the window, and pushed a rolling shutter in front of it. Then he struck a match, and, lighting a horn-glazed lantern that hung on a wooden peg near the window, he proceeded to arrange some sacks so as to form a kind of chair with seat, arms, and back. In this the miller seated himself, and having discovered the most comfortable angle for his large body, closed his eyes with a deep sigh. The way in which he settled himself among the sacks plainly indicated that he expected to spend some time in the mill; but his endeavour to make himself comfortable was unsuccessful, however, judging from the restless manner in which he continually kept changing his

position. Several times he consulted his great double-cased silver watch, which it seemed to require no little strength to haul up from the depths of his fob-pocket; while at briefer intervals he sat up and listened attentively. Again he would lean back with a sigh, and close his eyes, as if coveting sleep. Yet he was not sleepy; he hated sleep, and dreaded its embrace, suffocating and horrible as the clutch of a great green cobra. Sleep was to him the time of relentless tragedy, wherein the murder that was on his unhappy spirit re-enacted itself over and over again with pitiless force and detail. 'Twas a wonder he had not gone raving mad. How his reason could have kept itself from growing dizzy and sick, and falling headlong from its throne, amid such a long procession of nightly horrors, is a problem we must leave to physicians and metaphysicians.

Crime breeds crime: the miller was feeling this to-night, with a rage whose impotent heart was fear. What had Kneebone, an utter stranger, to do with the taking off of his brother Abel? Yet the chances were that, even at that moment, Kneebone himself was a dire illustration of the terrible truth that crime breeds crime. Then, was not he—the miller—a free agent? Precisely; to the same extent and no more than he was on that far-off day in May when, like a second Cain, he slew his brother. Below the will, deep down in the hidden

whirlpool of motive, there was still at work the initial movement whose energy had once transmuted itself into fratricide. Would that primal force never wear itself out, never die of exhaustion? Could not its *quality* be changed? Could it not be opposed and annihilated by some other force operative in the secret places of human nature? Opinions differ. Meanwhile, one thing was certain: at core the miller was the same man as he was twenty years earlier—as he was, for the matter of that, fifty or more years before, while yet he drew milk from his mother's breasts. In a dim way the miller was feeling this to-night; and, curiously enough, the realisation of this bit of psychological truth translated itself into the physical sensation of a burn. He felt he was burning. The sensation was local; at times it was in his heart, and at times it was in his head—a spot of fire in the middle of his brain.

"This is hell, hell itself!" he gasped, springing to his feet, and clasping his head with his hands: then he paced to and fro between the sacks of corn. He was right—it was hell. His nature was capable of murder, and he saw the fact as through a glass darkly: there was a time when the fallen seraph himself would have known a new agony at the like vision. And the miller was not even "an archangel a little damaged." He had only the rotten strength of his humanity to uphold him. Perhaps in that hour he trod nigh to the borders

of the dark land of delirium. Presently he stood perfectly still and listened. There was a faint noise below, which quickly grew into a distinct footfall on the steps leading into the grinding-room.

“At last! I must pull myself together, or the rogue will smell a rat,” muttered the miller, half audibly. The process of pulling one’s self together on the spur of the moment is easy only in imagination, if only for the simple reason that not one man in a hundred knows how to go about it. The miller did not know. He shook himself like a big dog, and assuming his habitual expression of genial glumness to an exaggerated degree, he seated himself with a remarkable stiffness, which he meant for dignity, upon one of the upright sacks. As a comedian’s effort to mimic and caricature the miller of Voe, the result would have been as excellent as it certainly was comic. Apparently he realised that something was wrong; for after he had posed for a few seconds he dropped from his position into the previously occupied chair of sacks. He crossed his fat legs with difficulty, pushed his wideawake hat to the back of his head, and leaning back jauntily, began to whistle softly the familiar tune of “Cheer, boys, cheer.” Never had the miller looked less like himself than at that moment, when he had made a supreme effort to pull himself together.

He had barely given the last pull when the head

and face of Am Ende were visible on a line with the floor, coming up the ladder. As Am leaned forward with his chin upon the floor, and peered into the dimly lighted room, the effect was that of a living head upon the floor, without a body. It was not a handsome head either. Hatless as it now was, its red hair might have been formed of minute wires, so stiff, savage, and unkempt did it appear; its face was sharp as a hatchet; its little red eyes twinkled and gleamed like the eyes of a gnome; its mouth was large, and something in the arrangement of the teeth made it seem ravenous as the mouth of a wolf. It was anything but a comely countenance, and as it lay there on the floor it looked weird, grotesque, horrible. The miller was perfectly familiar with the uncanny visage, and familiarity which is cruel to beauty is kind to ugliness; nevertheless, a shiver went through the miller. He ceased whistling "Cheer, boys, cheer," and called out, "So you have come at last, have you?"

"I'll et my head if I could mak' out where you was, sir, it's so dim-like. I heard somebody a-whistlin', and I was a-saying to myself, 'Demme, that baint the miller a-whistlin'.' Never knowed you could whistle afore," answered the head, with a grimace of pain.

"What's the matter with you? Don't stick there, man, grinning like a death's head," exclaimed the miller, with some heat. Whereupon Am Ende ascended the

ladder, and came limping towards the miller; his body was long and lean, but had none of the grotesque ugliness that characterised his face and head.

"I'm hurt, miller, badly hurt," he said, with a snuffle.

"Where?"

"Here, in the caulf o' me leg. I've lost no end o' blood," answered Am Ende, feeling the calf of his right leg, which was bound round with an old dark-coloured handkerchief.

"How did that happen?"

"Blest if I know to half an hour. I was a-makin' off as hard as I could down hill, when crack went a pistol an' I thought I was done for. I felt a stingin' pain in me leg, and I yelled out enough to scare the dead. I came nigh swoonin' when I got to th' lane end."

"Idiot! Am I to sit here all night while you gabble about what you felt? What's the meaning of it all? What have you done?" roared the miller, with a purple face, and hands that twitched with rage.

"I was a-comin' to that, and there's no cause to go and bully me like that, miller. We'd got our man down, and was a-givin' it to him in fine style, when the devil began to fight like a Hindian and roar out 'Murder' like a bull. Gad! at one time I was a-thinkin' he was goin' to knock us all out. The lads thought so too. It

got our blood up, I can tell you, and we just set on again in dead earnest; and his life 'udn't 'a bin worth an old copper in five minutes' time. You see, it was so infernally dark one couldn't mak' out one's hand like. Well, all of a sudden we found out there was another chap in the game. Lord! he was like a spirit. 'I know you all!' he yelled out. Gad! you should 'a seen the lads when they heard that. They thought it was a kind of spook. They made no bones about it, but just went like two scared deer over the wall into the woods. I tell you, I'm badly hurt, miller," concluded Am Ende, with an exclamation of pain as he seated himself on the top of a sack.

For a moment or two the miller clutched and tugged at his collar and neckerchief as though he was choking; then he bounded to his feet, and before Am Ende could realise the situation he found himself on the floor, with the miller on the top of him.

"You damned rogue, why didn't you kill him? Kill him, I say. Do you know what you've gone and done, you born idiot!" gasped the miller, pounding the head of Am Ende as he thought upon the floor, but in reality upon the corner of an overturned sack half full of grain.

"If I'd—killed him—you'd—'a cursed me, but—I'll do—it yet," cried Am Ende, getting out the words as best he could, between the poundings of his head upon the sack.

The miller was breathless and passion-spent. "There, there; get up, you wretch! I'm a fool for dealing with a fool," he said, relaxing his grip upon Am Ende, and rising to his feet.

"I did the best I could. I'll do better next time though," answered Am Ende, with one of his strange oaths.

"I daresay you will, if you get a chance. But you stand more chance of getting twenty years' penal servitude. Anyway, don't you lift a finger against him again until I bid you; you understand?"

"Yes, I understand. As for going to jail, you won't let me do that, miller, I know," remarked Am Ende. His tone of voice was at the most ambiguous only; but the miller was in an uncompromising mood.

With a growl he turned on Am Ende, and said, "And why won't I?"

Am Ende kept his eyes on the ground, and was silent.

Continued the miller, "Look here; let us have no mistake about it. If you had done the job neatly, I would have stood by you if anything had turned up. But I'll never stand by a blundering fool. If anything comes of it—and your man has got a scent like a beagle, I'm thinking—you will have to get out of it as you got into it, by the aid of your fat wits."

"Some folks dunna know when they've got a ring

in their nose!" snarled Am Ende, with great daring. Instinctively he held himself on the defensive as he spoke, expecting an attack from the infuriated miller.

But the miller only uttered a scornful laugh, and said, "Happen they don't. And when I carry a ring, it will be for somebody else's snout. I'm thinking we had better part for good."

"Nay, miller, dunna say that. I didna mean to be impudent. I ask your pardon, sir, for what I said about the ring. Keep me on, sir, and I'll do your bidding, and no grumbling about it neither," whined Am Ende, meek as a lamb.

"Well, I'll think about it," answered the miller, gruffly. He knew his man, and knew his worth.

"That's like yourself, miller, and much obliged to you I be. You'll try and help me out of this here scrape, sir—won't you?" said Am Ende, in a tone of entreaty.

"Happen I will, though you don't deserve aught better than a taste of the treadmill. Sorry rascals you must have been not to be able to give one man a sound thrashing! You ought to be ashamed to show your face in the light. Get away with you!" cried the miller, in much the same tone as he would have rated his terrier for not facing a pugnacious rat.

"You baint fair with us, miller. We did thrash him

black and blue; and you dunna count the spook," protested Am Ende, reproachfully.

"Nonsense, fellow! you none thrashed him. I told you—didn't I?—to keep cool, lay it on well, and let him know that it was meant to betoken that we should value his absence more than his presence, eh?"

"Them was the orders you gave me, miller, and them was the orders I gave to the lads. And we let him know, too, what it betokened. But—I might as well own up—we didna keep cool enough."

"Cool enough! Didn't I tell you there was to be no—no murder?—nothing but a good beating?" demanded the miller. His blanched face as he spoke the word "murder" struck Am Ende as being very curious.

"Well, who's done any murder, I'd like to know? I judge I'm nearer dead than any one o' them two. I feels queer-like here," said Am Ende, tapping his forehead.

"Well, that remains to be seen. You'll feel funny in the morning, I'm thinking, when you hear you've done for him!"

Am Ende made no answer save with his eyes, which shot a sinister gleam.

"Have you any notion who was the bogey that scared you brave men?" enquired the miller.

Am Ende shook his head decisively as he replied,

"Not the sma'est on earth. From his tones he wasna a Voe chap."

Am Ende was a glorious liar, full-hearted, artistic, natural, who did not hesitate to take both his eyes off truth, and had a fine contempt for the Cretans whose glance was askance. He was lying now.

Said the miller, with a constrained manner, "Are you sure you would have known if it had been—well, say Kneebone's assistant?"

"Known if it had bin young Boden's voice!"

"It was not, then?"

"I'm dead sure o' that; I'd tak a Bible oath it wasna neither young Abel Boden nor any other Voe chap," said Am Ende, with the utmost solemnity.

He was lying gloriously. He knew only too well that it was Abel Boden, and no one else, who had rescued Kneebone. But he also knew that the truth would be mightily unpleasant for his master to hear, and might be productive of consequences the reverse of agreeable to himself: a better reason for a lie he could not conceive.

"Well, you've need to thank your stars it wasn't him; but you will have to be mighty careful to avoid suspicion. Can you trust the other fellows?"

"Oh, they're all right. It isna the first job of the kind they've done."

"You are sure they have no idea of where the money came from?"

"Take me oath on it. I'm a-feeling mighty queer-like, miller. I'm badly hurt," said Am Ende, wofully. And, indeed, the scamp showed signs of giving out; his face was livid, and his lips were turning blue. Not that he was dangerously wounded by any means. He had lost some blood at first, but the bandage had already put a stop to the bleeding. But he was afraid he was mortally wounded; and fear has killed more people than either bullets or disease.

"Let me look at your leg. I reckon you are more scared than hurt," remarked the miller, with a bit of contempt.

Am Ende stretched forth the wounded limb, and the miller bent down to examine it. Suddenly Am Ende cried out—

"Don't! For God's sake dunna touch it! Brandy, brandy!"

The miller sprang up, and, seizing Am Ende by the shoulder, exclaimed, "Get up with you, and walk about!"

"I canna, miller—I canna," groaned the fear-stricken man.

"Nonsense! You'll have to. Come—lean on me, and let us get down into the house," said the miller, who was getting nervous himself.

The prospect of Am Ende dying up there in the store-room frightened him. As he spoke, he put his arms round his companion and raised him on to his feet. With considerable difficulty he got him as far as the head of the ladder, but how to get him down he did not know. If Am Ende had only been a sack of grain, the miller would have put a chain round his neck, and lowered him by means of a small crane at the other end of the room. But the crane would not work well in the present case.

"Can't you get down the ladder? Come, try," said the miller in a persuasive tone.

For an answer, Am Ende gave a deep groan, and made as if about to sink in a heap upon the floor.

"Good heavens! what am I to do with him?" ejaculated the miller. "Do you think if I got you on my back, you could hold on till I got you to the bottom?" he asked.

"Dunna know. I'll try," murmured Am Ende. So the miller turned round and stooped a little, while Am Ende put his arms round his neck.

"You must hold fast. If you fall you will be killed," remarked the miller. Then he descended the ladder, which creaked ominously under the heavy weight.

The stairs leading down from the grinding-room

were broad and strong, and altogether preferable to the shaky ladder they had just descended; but they were at the far end of the room from the ladder. The room was full of obstructions of one kind or another, and was, moreover, as dark as a chimney.

"Look here—I must go up and get the lantern, or we shall break our necks," said the miller, putting up his hands and loosening Am Ende's convulsive grasp.

"Leave me here and fetch the doctor," moaned Am Ende, sinking to the floor.

"Doctor be hanged! It'll get all over the place if a doctor comes fooling round. Aren't you any better?"

"I'm dying, miller, dying. Happen it's as well to own up now."

"What do you mean? Speak, man, before it's too late!"

"Th' spook was young Abel Bo—— dyin'," murmured Am Ende. His voice died away in a faint whisper, and all was silent as death.

For a while the miller forgot all about Am Ende. His mind seemed to reel and stagger under confused images of murder and revenge. Perhaps Am Ende had lied all through, and the battered forms of Kneebone and Abel were lying stark and lifeless on the black hillside, only waiting for the morning light to reveal the

deed of darkness. If that was so, sure as fate there was a time of sifting before him. Years ago there had crept out, and mingled as it were with the air men breathed, dark rumours and sinister hints. None would father them, none would even speak them out; but the air was tainted with them. They came to nothing—perhaps they existed only in his imagination—but they would revive again in an instant, and they would multiply, and maybe they would culminate in a great hoarse shout of “Away with him! Away with him!” Oh, it was horrible! And a groan of agony broke from the miller. Then again he thought of the two smiths not as dead but alive—altogether too much alive. He did not fear Abel’s hate, but Abel’s knowledge. Abel had fingers that could almost talk—fingers wise as a blind man’s. Abel had eyes like a fox, to which the darkness and the light were as one. He had cried out, “I know you all.” Abel was an arithmetician; he could put two and two together, and make no mistake about their sum. So could Kneebone, from all accounts. Abel’s wit would wing Kneebone’s anger, and between them they would draw a bow at a venture, and let fly a shaft that would go home with a crash. Yes, he was going to be sifted as they sift wheat. He would not have minded, but that he felt he would turn out nothing but chaff.

Just here the miller’s thoughts reverted to Am Ende,

and he was about to curse him, when something suggested that perhaps the real Am Ende had silently flitted from the mill for ever. Straightway the miller made up the ladder with all speed for the lantern. He was back again in a few moments, and as he held the lantern to Am Ende's face his hands trembled. He started back terrified, and dropping the lantern on the floor, he put his hands to his head, exclaiming, "O God, he's dead!" He seemed at an utter loss what to do next. He thought he would go away and leave Am Ende lying there till morning, when he could perhaps manage for his foreman to find the body first. Then he thought he would carry the body into the house and send for the doctor; no, he would not take it into the house, but he would go at once and fetch the doctor. With this purpose he actually went as far as the stairs, but he came back again and stood gazing with the fascination of horror upon the prostrate form. Gradually the idea shaped itself in his mind that he would carry the dead man out into the plantation, and leave him there to be discovered when and how fortune might direct. Questionless it savoured of heartlessness, of inhumanity, but it was the most prudent course he could think of. It was a nasty thing to handle a dead body. He had done so once before—involuntarily he put his hand to his nether lip and scratched it. But no scratching could ease the sting and burn of that

Cain spot. With a feeling of desperation the miller seized the body of Am Ende, shouldered it as he would a sack of flour, and with his deadly load passed down the stairs and out into the plantation.

CHAPTER IX.

AT THE HAG STONE.

As soon as Ruth was gone, Abel plunged into the denser and darker part of the plantation which covered the steep slope of the hillside, and was of considerable extent. Abel was as much at home in a wood at night as most men, under the same circumstances, are at sea. A polecat had no keener vision, nor a fox a lighter tread. He moved under the trees, between the bushes, and over the innumerable ground-growths and other obstructions, swiftly and noiselessly, as a native woodland animal. His path was circuitous, though he appeared to be making for a definite point. At intervals he halted to listen for an instant, and then he went silently on again. At length he came to a great black rock that stood out from the steep face of the hill, known by the weird name of the Hag Stone. There was something dark and malignant, at the best of times, in the aspect of this solitary mass of grit-stone, towering up thirty feet or more; but in the broken moonlight, and amid the gloom of the pines, it suggested a crouching monster of the prime, grim, and

terrible. By climbing the hillside, it was not very difficult to reach the broad flat top of the Hag Stone. It called for nerve rather than muscle. Abel had a fair share of the latter and a rich endowment of the former. His night roamings had been an excellent discipline for his nerves, and had killed out all common squeamishness. And while his melancholy and semi-mystical temperament kept him effectually rooted to the strange fantastic world of half experiences, his nocturnal habits had delivered him from the vulgar superstitions and illusions that haunt the generality of mankind.

Without any hesitation, Abel made his way on to the top of the rock. He remembered well that, the last time he was there, he found himself face to face with a fox three parts grown. Reynard started up in surprise, snapped his teeth and growled sharply, and looked as if he meant business. Whereupon Abel went down on all-fours, and advancing backwards till he came within range, he shot out his left foot with all his might, and sent the astonished fox headlong over the rock. There was no fox on the Hag Stone to-night, only a thin coating of snow. Taking off his soft hat and using it as a sort of broom, Abel cleared a space of the rock, and cast himself down upon it at full length. He forgot for the nonce that he had on what may be called his court dress, the pick of his wardrobe, and seldom

donned save when he was to appear before his queen. He lay for a while motionless, then he raised his head a little above the rock and looked over. He could see the base of the rock, which projected forward at a precipitous angle. There stood the miller apparently wiping the perspiration from his brow, and at his feet lay the lifeless form of Am Ende. Between the branches of a big red-boled pine came a sudden flood of pale radiance, and fell, grey and ghast, upon the figures of the quick and the dead. Abel saw, and no longer doubted. His worst fears were confirmed. Am Ende was dead. Who had slain him—Kneebone or the miller? A great wave of sickness came over Abel, his head swam, he shuddered, and involuntarily he uttered a sound that began like a sigh and ended like a groan. The miller heard it, and without knowing what it was or whence it came, his ruddy face grew ashen and his knees trembled with terror. To him it was no mortal sound, but a supernatural echo of a similar sound that he had heard twenty years ago. Like a fury-haunted creature, he cast one glance at the body of Am Ende, and then turned and fled through the wood.

Abel, whose quick ears could follow the movements of the wee beasties of the field and wood, and knew the characteristic sounds of the small fry of creation, heard nothing of the retreat of the miller, who went

through the plantation like an elephant rather than a startled stag. His senses were confused, and his consciousness was numb to every idea save that of a dreadful calamity. It was some time before he realised his position, and rose to his feet. The base of the rock was now shrouded in sevenfold gloom, which Abel tried in vain to pierce with his keen vision. He listened, but could hear nothing. Only in imagination—the mystic light that never was on sea or land—could he see the dead man lying down there, under the shadow of the pines and firs. Gathering himself together, Abel left the Hag Stone and set off for home; but after he had gone some distance he changed his mind, and with his mind his route. In a little while he was at the Nag's Head. He found Kneebone in his little back parlour, comforting himself with tobacco and toddy.

“Why, lad, what's up? You look as white as a sheet,” cried Kneebone.

“I feel a bit shaky, I own,” answered Abel, as he seated himself.

“Well, just put the kettle on the fire, and we will soon mend that,” said Kneebone, getting another glass from the sideboard, and proceeding to mix some toddy. “There, lad,” he said, handing it to Abel, “drink that. It has done me a power of good already. I tell you what, I am feeling sore all over me. Every bone in

my body seems to have a separate and particular ache all its own. I thought once of sending for the doctor to examine me. Then I thought I wouldn't. I wasn't sure that I wanted the affair to get out; leastways, not yet awhile. I judge I shall be all right in a day or two. I guess one or two of those miserable skunks are feeling pretty sore. May they have never a pipe nor a glass to console them till the next new moon, is all I wish them."

Kneebone spoke slowly, interjecting his sentences between the puffs of his pipe. He was careful to keep his voice up at the end of each remark, which was as much as telling Abel that he was not expected to talk yet. Abel understood the intonation, and kept silent, while Kneebone watched him furtively from under his shaggy brows.

"You are feeling better, lad?" he said, presently.

"I do, and no mistake," answered Abel, whose countenance had recovered its colourless but healthy subcutaneous warmth.

"Will you try a pipe?"

"I don't mind if I do."

"That's right. Now we can defy fate."

The top of Abel's tobacco seemed like a fiery eye that kept opening and shutting at each pull, when Kneebone said—

"Now, if you like, you can tell me what has brought you back here again to-night."

Instantly Abel put his long clay pipe down upon the fender.

“Nay, nay, none of that, lad. The pipe will keep you cool,—only mind it doesn’t go out. If I had to report at headquarters how the Judgment Day went off among men, I’m thinking I should ask the Great Chief to let me report with a pipe between my teeth. If I could do it at all, I could do it then. If ever you are on your mettle, lad, stick to your pipe! It will keep the fire in your heart and the frost in your brain. I’ve known men to strike a match, globing it with their hands from the wind, and light their pipe, when death stood in front of them. And they never went down. Seems as how the light dazzled the great archer that he could not aim straight.”

Kneebone spoke from a very varied and anything but a drawing-room experience. He knew what it was to pass months alone in the lofty summit valleys of the Sierra Nevada, without seeing a living soul. In the Australian bush and the backwoods of Oregon, he had formed his estimate of the companionship of a pipe, had discovered the almost divine virtue that resides in the fragrant weed. From it he had over and over again extracted companionship, consolation, and courage. He had come to regard it much as an ancient Hindu, half sensualist and half devotee, regarded the sacred soma-plant. And being, like most of his countrymen,

the happy possessor of a few personal prejudices, he even went so far as to bracket the man that never smoked with the man that never laughed. Few, and not remarkably blessed, are the people that have no occasion to rejoice that the cultivation of a few roots of prejudice may go hand in hand with the successful culture of virtue and piety.

While Kneebone was talking, Abel resumed his pipe. When his turn came, he said, "Some people, and there are doctors among them, are very down on smoking nowadays."

"No doubt. There's nothing but what is cried down by somebody; but prejudice isn't science, any more than a collection of whims and crotchets is a gospel. As for the doctors, they breed cranks and croakers as many as do the clergy. Look at the States. There is scarcely a medical man in all New England, to say nothing of out West, who dare advise or sanction publicly the use of alcoholic drinks. If he did, it would kill his professional reputation and practice. I respect professional opinion when it is free. When it is not free, it is the opinion of a slave—and worth no more. If you live, lad, to be my age, you will see the time when Yankee doctors will have to take the same attitude towards tobacco as they have towards alcohol. And a more galling position for a set of professional men, I can't imagine. But it will run itself out, sooner

or later. Not even to quiet the women will truth hold its tongue for aye. Somehow, I fancy a doctor should be like a judge, impartial, fearless, caring only for the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. But there—my saying is this, lad: If smoking agrees with you, and you like it, smoke. If it doesn't suit you, and I reckon you will soon find it out if it doesn't, then don't smoke. The rest is all but leather and prunello. Now let me hear what's up."

"Am Ende is dead," said Abel, with tragic brevity.

"Eh! What do you say?" exclaimed Kneebone, sharply.

Said Abel again, "Am Ende is dead."

"How do you know?" enquired Kneebone, incredulously.

"I have seen him. He's lying at the foot of the Hag Stone."

"Nonsense! You are dreaming. You have been upset, and your nerves are out of gear. What were you doing at the Hag Stone to-night, I should like to know?"

"Nay, I'm none dreaming," said Abel. Then he told Kneebone how it all came about.

Abel had no padding to do, and so his narrative was brief, swift, and powerful. When he had done, Kneebone lay back and laughed. As men weep for

joy so they laugh with horror. Kneebone's laugh was terrible. He thought he had slain a man.

"I guess I'd better send for the doctor now," he said abruptly. Abel only stared at him, and said nothing. "If I've got to be tried for murder or manslaughter, it may as well be on record that the rogues first beat me black and blue. Yes, I'm decidedly in need of a doctor. Good God, that I should ever have done such a thing! Ring the bell, lad." And Kneebone lay back again in his chair and laughed. He thought he had slain a man!

With his hand on the bell-rope, Abel paused and said, "We are not sure that we did the killing."

"We? We? What had you to do with it? I reckon I did the shooting, not you. But I'm not daft, lad; I understand it. A mongrel would have stood off from me now, and have looked after his own skin. You jump into the same boat with me, and are ready to work an oar side by side with me. Lad, before heaven, I would have done the like for you! But you would not let me, I know you wouldn't. Nor am I going to let you. Now, what do you mean by saying that we are not sure that I did the killing?"

Abel let go the rope without pulling it as he answered, "I don't like to say it, I'll own, but there's the miller. What was he doing with the body like that?"

"That's a leaky bucket, lad; won't hold water. Don't you see, the miller didn't want the fellow to be found about the mill, for fear it should connect him with that ruffianly attack on me. The poor scamp was badly hit, it seems, bled to death at the mill, and the miller had to get rid of him. That's my version, and by the same token I'm—ugh! it's horrible, horrible!" And Kneebone hid his face in his hands.

"It looks awfully probable, Mr. Kneebone, I'll admit. It doesn't follow that it's true, though, for all that. Suppose Am Ende reported how things went on the hillside. He knows my voice well enough, and would let the miller know who it was that came to your help. The miller would argue that I recognised Am Ende. Everybody knows that Am Ende is a mere tool in the miller's hands. He would argue that we should put two and two together. Don't you think he would grow mad at the way Am Ende bungled the job? I do. By Jove! if he got an idea that his share in the work was likely to be known, his fury would almost choke him. In his passion he would fell Am Ende as he would an ox. I'm thinking it's more likely the miller did it than yourself, sir."

For a while nothing was said by either of the two men, who sat smoking, with their eyes on the ruddy fire, wherein they saw images of coming trouble and woe.

Said Kneebone presently, "There is something in what you say, but not much, I'm afraid. I should take more stock in it, if I hadn't done the shooting. Come to think of it, it wasn't right of me. He was running away when I did it."

"He got no more than his deserts."

"Yea, lad, he did. I'm in no great hurry to die, but I'd rather have been killed myself than have killed a man. I fired low on purpose, as I thought, not to hurt him badly. I don't think I'll have a doctor now. In the morning I'll go and put myself in the hands of the police."

"I don't think I would. Better wait a bit and see how things shape themselves. My mind isn't at all clear as to the miller yet. But I'm sure of one thing. If you come forward to father the deed, he'll never say you nay, whether he did it or not."

But Kneebone only shook his head, and answered, "I will stick to the programme, lad. There's no good likely to come of delay."

"I shall go with you, then," said Abel, resolutely.

"There is no occasion; and you are better out of it, if you can be kept out."

"All right, but I'm going all the same. I fancy I'd better sleep here to-night."

"Why?"

"Then you won't give me the slip."

"Nay, since you wish it, I won't do that. Go home, and try and get a good rest if you can. Old Nathan would wonder what had become of you."

Said Abel with a smile, "He knows my ways too well for that. I'm out more nights of the year than I'm in. Now I have got your promise, though, I will go home. I've got a bit of work at the smithy I shall want to finish before we go. I'll come early, if you like?"

"There is no need to hurry about it. I'll come up to the smithy after breakfast. The dead never come to life again, do they, lad?"

"No, not round here; nor are the lost ever found; nor do the absent ever return," answered Abel, with a deep sigh. His eyes were on the fire, and Kneebone looked at him for some moments with a strange expression of countenance. He seemed on the point of speaking, but he checked himself, and, like his companion, sighed deeply. A little later, the two shook hands and parted for the night.

Christopher Kneebone spent a bad night. Not his aching limbs kept him awake, but his troubled thoughts. It was daybreak before he fell asleep, but once asleep he slept soundly for some hours. When he awoke, he sprang up and looked at his watch—ten minutes to nine!

"Only fancy, the village blacksmith in bed at nine

o'clock in the morning, and this morning of all others!" he said, addressing the reflection of himself in the glass. He felt in worse bodily condition than ever—stiff-jointed, and sore all over. But if it took him a long time to dress, he made up for it at his breakfast, over which he lingered but a very few minutes. It was a pouring wet morning, and the village seemed deserted. Kneebone met no one between the Nag's Head and the smithy. He found Abel busy at work, and nothing but an ordinary morning's greeting passed between them.

Kneebone seated himself on a bench and watched Abel work. Presently he said, "It's time to be getting ready to start, isn't it?"

"Yewdle Brig?"

"Yes."

"I don't like the idea. It is like putting your head into the lion's mouth. I'm thinking it would be as well to let the lion put it in himself, if he wants it," said Abel, working the large bellows with one hand, and holding a pair of tongs with the other.

"I must go. I couldn't rest with a load like this on my mind."

"I went as far as the Hag Stone this morning to——"

Abel ceased blowing and talking, and turned towards the shoeing shop adjoining, where a horse was

heard entering. Suddenly a man's voice was heard talking to the horse, that seemed inclined to be restive. Abel put down the tongs, and had just picked up his tool-box when the man left the horse and came and stood in the doorway. It was Am Ende himself! There he stood, with his gleaming gnome-like eyes fixed first on Kneebone and then on Abel, a peculiar smile playing about his mouth, with his hands in his pockets, and his whole bearing one of masterly impudence. What brought him there was briefly this: On recovering from his deep swoon—for swoon it was, and nothing worse—Am Ende to his utter amazement found himself lying at the foot of the Hag Stone. He was terribly weak and half dazed, but he made his way back to the mill, where the miller received him with much the same feeling and much the same welcome as he would a real spook.

Am Ende wanted to know how he came to be left lying "like a dead jackass out in the woods," as he graphically put it. For a while the miller hedged and dodged, but being hard pressed he finally admitted the truth.

"I swear I thought you dead, and what was I to do? It would never do for you to have been found in the mill. I'm nation glad you're alive, man," he said, with an unusual amount of feeling.

With all his faults, Am Ende was not pig-headed.

Indeed, he had a measure of sweet reasonableness in his composition. Hence he made no fuss, but like a wise man accepted the situation, and declared himself satisfied, under the circumstances, with the miller's explanation. That night he slept at the mill. In the morning he felt like staying in bed, but the miller routed him out, saying, "You can come to bed in an hour or two, but you must get up and show yourself. We are not out of the woods yet, you know." Some time later he said, "You'll take the grey mare to the smithy. She wants a hind shoe."

Am Ende stared hard at hearing this, but said nothing. Doubtless the miller knew what he was about. So Am Ende put a halter on the mare and rode her to the smithy. On seeing him, Kneebone sprang to his feet and stared like a wild man, first at Am Ende and then at Abel.

"I've brought th' mare from th' mill, the grey un. She wants a hind shoe puttin' on," said Am Ende, grinning.

"And where have you come from, I should like to know? I thought you were——" Abel checked himself.

"I might ha' bin visitin' Old Nick, and smell o' brimstun, the way you gaze at me," answered Am Ende, boldly.

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"I'll have the mare done in an hour," said Abel. Whereupon Am Ende limped away.

The two men watched him down the road, then Kneebone said, "Well, well! And just think what a lot of sentiment I've gone and wasted."

CHAPTER X.

A BIT OF INFORMATION.

It was Sunday morning, the first Sunday in April, and seemingly the first day in spring. In a cloudless sky of tenderest blue the sun poured down a rare flood of light and heat, gladdening the eyes and warming the hearts of man and beast. A soft balmy wind came out of the south, rustling the dead leaves, and gently swaying the bare branches that were hastening into bud. All nature was awake and happy, and, but that it was holy Sabbath, the trees stood ready to clap their hands and laugh aloud for joy. The old church of Voe, a barn-like structure dating from the fifteenth century, had been closed for a dozen years; a new church having been built by Squire Saxton at a short distance from the old one, but inside the park, and close to the Hall. It was small and pretty, and very modern in its interior colouring and decoration. Its single bell was now tolling in a sepulchral fashion, and up from Voe came a long straggling line of men, women, and children, obedient to its summons. The nearest way from Voe was along the park drive, and

on a Sunday all the gates were thrown open, except such as were necessary to keep in the deer and other park animals; and the villagers generally availed themselves of the privilege of strolling between steep hillsides, whose bases were thickly fringed with laurels and rhododendrons, while the higher slopes were covered with ferns and long fine grasses, dotted with lichen-marked boulders, and crowned with large pines. Higher up the drive were avenues of beeches and chestnuts, with high grass-land to the right, and heavily rolling ground, well timbered and bronzed with bracken, stretching far away to the left. Fallow deer, donkeys, and Highland cattle were grouped here and there in artistic disorder, as though they had been educated into the knowledge that their chief duty in life was to make themselves ornamental.

A great incentive to attend church on a fine Sunday morning was the prospect of a stroll through Owlcote park. Inside the church, the southern transept was devoted entirely to the Squire and his household. One-half of the northern transept was occupied by the choir, while the remaining half consisted of a large pew which, like that of the Squire, was dignified with a crimson curtain in front, supported by a brass rod and rings. This curtain was usually put to the purpose for which it was designed; for while the Squire's curtain was always drawn aside as far as possible, the opposite cur-

tain was invariably extended so as to completely hide its occupants from the gaze of the body of worshippers in the nave. And, because we generally see a thing in the worst of all possible aspects, this drawing of the curtain seemed like pride or ostentation, while it might very well have been due to sheer modesty, or dislike of prominence during worship, or even intense devotion. Whatever might have been the motive, however, such was the fact. "Gentleman" Phythian's pew was always curtained close as a confessional.

The occupants of the pew, on the above-mentioned morning, were a gentleman and a lady, who, as usual, were the first to enter the church after the clerk had opened the doors; they were also the last to leave the church, as a rule. They were both attired in drab, and about them seemed to cling an air of refined old-fashioned quaintness that impressed one like a rare and pleasant odour. It was difficult to lay the finger on any one point of singularity, and when this was done, the sole result was disappointment arising from a sense of having, after all, missed the true point. No critical observation or analysis ever seemed to yield the real cause of distinction. Items such as the tint of their costumes, the antique style of the gentleman's necktie, the peculiar draping of a peculiar shawl, the bowed hair over the lady's temples, all doubtless contributed to the general effect, though they were felt to be con-

temptibly inadequate when considered as the efficient cause. One's soul is, or should be, the chief and dominating fact about one; and a touch of singularity in the soul may very well express itself like a diffused perfume or universal tint. There will be no distinct mark of eccentricity, no definite badge of oddity; but, on the other hand, everything, from style of costume to cast of countenance, will be delicately touched with the peculiar quality of the soul. The result may be exceedingly pleasant, or the opposite. Everything is in degree. And given the right degree, the result is a delicate and delicious quaintness that may very easily be mistaken for a vestige of the manners of a bygone generation.

We are inclined to the opinion that to this category belong some of the sweetest characters on earth, and possibly some also of the sourest. To this category belonged the lady and gentleman in the red-curtained pew. In features they were much alike, and conformed a little to the Jewish type; though we believe we are correct in saying that they had not a drop of the grand old Semitic blood in their veins. Husband and wife, were they? No; they were simply sister and brother, by name Janoca and Balthasar Phythian. In the order of sister and brother we insinuate two important facts—to wit, seniority and supremacy. Miss Janoca Phythian had just entered her ninth lustrum, while her brother

was, fortunately or unfortunately, only in the middle of his eighth.

Only children, fools, and centenarians are supposed to regret the fewness of their years; nevertheless, when it is allied with the kindred fact of domestic juniority, youthfulness is as apt to assume the form of a thorn in the flesh as of a rose in the button-hole. Janoca Phythian never allowed herself or her brother to forget the thirty months' start she made over Balthasar in the race of life. She had got the start of him, and she kept it; for what was the earthly use of going to the trouble of getting into swaddling-clothes two years and a half before Balthasar if she was not to remain mistress of the situation all through? The idea was so absurd that Mistress Janoca had never for a moment doubted that Balthasar fully appreciated its absurdity. And, to do that humour-loving and gentle-natured gentleman justice, he had never been blind to the absurdity of the idea, as it existed in Janoca's mind. That he thought her thought on the subject is open to question, though it must be admitted he was a most dutiful subject. He never revolted, never conspired, very seldom availed himself even of the Constitutional Right of Petition. The tactics of an obstructionist did not commend themselves to his sense of fairness, nor the methods of an agitator to his sense of dignity. He could have agitated only among himself; and it is an ascertained politico-

psychological fact that "agitators" prefer to operate upon the "masses" rather than themselves. They are the impassive batteries that generate and distribute the electric fluid that makes such a commotion.

As if to support and lend dignity to the Janocian theory, Nature had subordinated the slight figure of the man, in stature. The difference was but small—perhaps half an inch—but the effect was great. It was like a crown on the head, like a tower on a cathedral. Again, the difference in height was accentuated by the upright and stately carriage of Janoca, as compared with the easier and less erect bearing of Balthasar. The hair of both, a dark brown, was already streaked with silver; both had dark eyes, noses slightly arched, large mouths full of sweetest humanity, and lovely teeth, and their expression of countenance was appropriate, as a satirical person once said, to a governing woman and a governed man. There was a look of power in the face of Janoca that was only hinted in the face of Balthasar. Both were loveable faces, almost handsome, brimful of intelligence, refined and humane; but somehow the degree of sweetness was with the man, as that of strength was with the woman. Janoca was slender and tall, but not tall enough to allow any margin for her brother to boast on the score of his height above the average. For the rest, they were people of means, and for the last seven years had lived at the old manor-

house, known as Carbel Chase, about a couple of miles from the mill, which had been left to them by an uncle. Previous to that they had resided a mile or two beyond Yewdle Brig; so that the Voese had never quite esteemed them lightly as being foreigners. Voe always spoke of Balthasar as "Gentleman" Phythian. It was understood that he had been bred to the law, though he had not practised for many years.

Says Parini: "When I was a young man I used occasionally to return to Bosisio, my native place. Every one there knew that I spent my time in study and writing. The peasants gave me credit for being poet, philosopher, doctor, mathematician, lawyer, theologian, and sufficiently a linguist to know all the languages in the world. . . . But whenever I gave them reason to think my learning was not as extensive as they supposed, I fell vastly in their estimation, and in the end they used to persuade themselves that after all my knowledge was no greater than theirs." Now, if there is anything in language more sure than Grimm's Great Phonetic Law, it is the fact that Bosisio in Italian spells Voe in English. Indeed, it is highly probable that at some remote period of time a colony of Voese settled at Bosisio, and named it after their original dwelling-place. That they were Aryans there can be no doubt, for none but Aryan peasants were ever capable of seeing in a returned native a duodecimo edition of the

Almighty. Voe had a superstitious reverence, finely blended with practical contempt, for knowledge that was too deep for it; and this kind of knowledge found its typical expression in the Law.

"Gentleman" Phythian was credited, like Parini, with being a master of most branches of knowledge. The idea of his immense learning was stamped upon their imagination like a line of great-primer. He had all legal science: whether Canon Law, or Civil, or Commercial, or Common, or Criminal, or Ecclesiastical, or International, or Maritime, or Martial, or Moral, or Mosaic, or Municipal, it mattered not a fig—he had it all snugly packed away and boxed up in that wonderful little cranium of his. That he carried under his hat, like so much dynamite, sufficient knowledge to make or mar one-half the families of England, was an article of faith among the villagers. How they got the idea was something of a mystery. Certainly not from Balthasar, who was one of the most modest of men—modest not in an ethical sense, but an intellectual. It is only in the United States that people lay a stress on ethical modesty as a great masculine virtue. Elsewhere men have sung it in praise of women. Perhaps in the future, women will sing it in praise of men. In part, the legend concerning Balthasar was due perhaps to Janoca, who had a habit of saying to any of the people she had

dealings with, "Mr. Phythian says so-and-so, and Mr. Phythian knows everything."

Said in her best manner, the saying was effective. People went away possessed with the idea that the courteous little lawyer was a man worth looking at, knowing all things. Like most clever women, Janoca had a touch of grave contempt for her sex—was as firmly convinced that they were incapable of ruling wisely as that she herself was capable. She was, so far, a staunch believer in the established order of things—wished to perpetuate it, and shrank from violating or weakening the sentiments and prejudices that were its public sanction and safeguard. Her saying, therefore, respecting her brother, may be understood as her method of veiling her supremacy from the vulgar eye. She displayed in public none of the insignia of rule, and cultivated a verbal fiction to conceal a domestic revolution. Logically, omniscience does not imply omnipotence; and between Balthasar being a master of all knowledge and being master in his own house, there was a deep sea instead of dry land.

But the Voese were not given to logic, and were expert in confounding ideas. Janoca's ruse was successful. Gentleman Phythian was popularly accredited with masking an iron hand under a silken glove. Side by side with respect for his erudition went con-

tempt for the little use he made of it. Beneficence entered into nobody's calculation. Folk simply marvelled that he was not maleficent. How it came about it is not our province to enquire, but the popular conception of power was essentially satanic among the Voese. If they had only his knowledge and power what would they not do? One thing was certain,—they would each have a Hall, and a park with deer and donkeys and Highland cattle in it, and drive a roan horse, and even stutter like the Squire himself. Moreover, they would turn the Squire into a poor quarryman, and teach him to curse the wretched climate and the wet days that either kept him idle or gave him rheumatism; he should live in a dirty cottage, and his lady should have to take in washing. There was fun in this, fierce side-splitting fun, that made Jake and Reuben roar till the tears came. Ah me! Ah me!

“Yawns the pit of the dragon,
Lit by rays from the blest.”

Little did Balthasar Phythian dream what a star of splendid ray he appeared to some scores of eyes, what a fantastic and fiery world he was the living centre of! How he would have laughed! How he would have joked! How sad-eyed and sick-hearted he would have grown! How he would have sighed, and hid himself from the sight of the little men with which God had “taunted the lofty land”! But his thoughts were pitched to quite

a different tune. For though he was high-minded, and selected his thoughts as he did his friends and his wines, nathless did he daily condescend in his sympathies to men of low state. A lover of humanity, a friend of the people, a seer of great truths in small facts, of things lovely in the midst of ugly things, he covered himself with charity as with a garment, and had a pleasant consciousness that he wore the garment with no awkwardness and with some little grace. Blessed is the man whose egotism is of no ranker growth. In a word, we may say of Balthasar Phythian what Coleridge said of a spiritual kinsman of his,—“Nothing ever left a stain on that gentle creature’s mind, which looked upon the degraded men and things around him like moonshine on a dunghill, which shines and takes no pollution. All things were shadows to him, except those which moved his affections.”

On this April Sunday morning, which was full of the genius of God, a remarkable phenomenon occurred, which was observed by nearly every one in church. The service was just getting under way when, to everybody’s astonishment, Janoca Phythian deliberately took the exclusive red curtain, drew it aside, and pushed it closely to the end of the rod! She did this with no haste or awkwardness, but with exquisite coolness and propriety, taking three or four graceful steps along the front of the pew the better to accomplish her purpose. Then she

stepped back to her rush-bottomed chair beside her brother, adjusted her gold eye-glasses, and went on with the service, as cool as a cucumber. The ghost of a smile was visible about the mouth of Gentleman Phythian, who kept his eyes upon his prayer-book, while he held his eye-glasses three or four inches from his nose. A strange momentary something—it was more like unto a low indistinguishable sound, inarticulate and subterranean, than anything else—filled, or seemed to fill, the church. Newspaper reporters would have expressed it thus—(*sensation in church*). Heads turned, eyes met, glances and facial muscles worked like telegraph instruments, and for some seconds the myriad motes in the sunshine seemed to be a dancing series of ?!?!?!?!?! Was Pride going to abdicate and cultivate cabbages, like Diocletian? Had the Phythians been converted? Was Miss Janoca's new bonnet at the bottom of it all? Had it any connection with A Time, Times, and Half a Time? Was the millennium at hand, when the lion and the lamb would gambol together in Owlcote park?

Curious how thin is the world-crust of reason, and how easily it is broken through. Grim, too, is the reflection that below the wafer of rationality are the seething *magma*, the twin pulps of fiery madness, enclosing the stony heart of central stupidity. Sparks of madness and particles of stupidity would have been seen in great streams and clouds, if one-half the ideas

suggested by Janoca's act had been visibly embodied in fire and rock. Half-way through the sermon Janoca bent towards her brother and whispered, "I want you to look at that young—lady sitting at the end of the pew under the tablet."

Balthasar looked, and continued looking, for the object indicated was pleasant to look upon. The young lady contemplated was dressed in a pretty close-fitting costume of a light-brown shade, and wore a dainty little bonnet the exact colour of her hair. Her tall, well-developed figure, graceful bearing, and the way in which she carried her head, imparted to her a certain air of distinction. Her countenance, likewise, was refined and full of character. Without being beautiful, her face held much of the charm of beauty. She was a brunette, and the high colour in her cheeks was singularly pure, and made no encroachment upon the delicate whiteness of her lovely throat. Brown were her eyes, and moulded for love and kisses was her mouth. A sweet, loveable creature, built on lines of intelligence, affection, and fidelity, and expressly designed by Nature to

"Disappear in blessed wife,
Servant to a wooden cradle,
Living in a baby's life."

The sermon was ended, when Janoca whispered, interrogatively, "Well?"

"I have looked at her," answered Balthasar, gravely.

"Do you know who she is?" asked Janoca.

"Yes; Miss Boden, the miller's daughter, isn't she?"

"Yes. I have a bit of information for you."

"Indeed! What is that, pray?" enquired Balthasar, reaching for his hat and stick.

Answered Janoca, "That girl, Balthasar, is your future—wife!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE GREAT ADVENTURE.

WITH an air of great deliberation Balthasar sat back in his chair, put his broad-brimmed silk hat upon his head, and looking calmly through his glasses at his sister, said, "What did you say, Jano? Well, what is the matter, pray?"

"Balthasar Phythian, are you taking leave of your wits? Don't you know where you are?" enquired Janoca, with a horrified look upon her face.

As she spoke she rose to her feet for the final hymn, and stepping forward, drew the curtain quickly in front of the pew. Then she turned, and bending down to Balthasar, who still kept his seat, she took his hat from his head, saying with an ironical smile about her mouth, "If you look like a Quaker, that is no reason why you should act like one. I will hold it for you till you are out of church."

Balthasar flushed heavily for a moment or two. He looked up at his sister, who was now singing sweetly in front of the red curtain; her eyes were devotionally high, and her hymn-book lay open on the top of his

hat, which she held in front of her with both hands. Balthasar stood up. Janoca's nose grew devotional as her eyes, and went up several degrees. Without turning his body in the least, Balthasar's hand went out, and when it came back it held Janoca's hymn-book. A moment later he broke forth into singing. He had a capital voice, and ought to have been fined for not singing regularly in church, whereas he never sang at all. Janoca, hearing the unwonted sound, turned quickly and looked first at her brother, and then at the top of his fine silk hat, and then again at her brother. His nose was at a beautiful pitch, his eyes were on the vaulted ceiling; rapt in devotion, he was singing like a musical saint. Janoca felt inclined to laugh.

It was a long hymn unabridged, and Janoca thought it would never end; and how silly it was to stand there, holding devoutly a man's silk hat in her hands! At the last verse but one, she leaned over a little and said, "Would you like your hat?"

Answered Balthasar, "Would you like your hymn-book?"

Then they faced each other and stood for a moment or two, both holding at once to hat and book. "One, two, three!" murmured Janoca, and the one let go the hat and the other the book.

Balthasar sat down hat in hand, and Janoca joined in with the singing of the last verse. So ended the

first scene of the first act of the Phythian Comedy of Courtship.

The Phythians, for some unknown but doubtless perfectly sound reason, dined early on Sundays. And it was towards the close of the great ceremony, when dessert was on the table, and the butler had withdrawn, and Balthasar had just begun to avail himself of the Sabbatic privilege of smoking a cigar in the dining-room, when Janoca next referred to the startling "bit of information" which she had communicated to her brother in church.

"Are you not glad that it is settled, Balthasar?" she enquired, suddenly.

Balthasar had pushed his chair a little from the table and was leaning back, with his eyes closed, and his feet stretched out in front of a seasonable fire.

"Yes," he answered, sweetly, "very. What do you refer to, though?"

"Whom you are to marry, of course. It was an inspiration, Balthasar. Nothing less than an inspiration."

"I thought the days of inspiration were over, Jano?" murmured Balthasar, softly. He thought the flavour of his cigar unusually good.

"For men, certainly; but not for women," answered Janoca, with beautiful intonation of voice, and a stately bend of her wise head. Balthasar laughed mellowly.

"I do not wish you to waste any time over it. And do not fiddle-faddle in your wooing. I have done my part, and now you do yours," continued Janoca, with no little decision in her tone.

"You have lost no time in providing me with a lady to wed, I'll admit. When I threw up the job as a hopeless affair, I gave you a calendar month to do it in. You have not been a fortnight over it. I admire your energy, Jano, though it makes for my destruction," said Balthasar, speaking very leisurely. Like his sister, he had a beautiful voice, and used it beautifully.

"Yes; I have been about as many days as you have been years, with this difference, that I have done something, while you never did anything," answered Janoca.

"Ah yes. 'Where angels fear to tread' ought to be, one would think, a sparsely populated locality. But it isn't, Jano. The poet, who ought to know, for he evidently visited that region, himself says it, that the inhabitants thereof are many. Jano, I am given to thinking, dear, that the wise man might well slip the hare and sidle up to the tortoise, when he is on his way to pick out the one girl, of all the girls in creation, that is to be his wife," said Balthasar, with an air of grave philosophy.

Janoca looked at him less severely. Then she smiled—she looked wondrously sweet when she smiled—and

said, "I do not care to see wisdom used as a mask to hide the face of folly, brother. You speak your wittiest when you are thinking your weakest. I said, if you could not find a wife for yourself, I would find one for you."

"I was looking among the stars for my angel. You had the advantage of me there, Jano. You looked in the mill, the village mill, and there you found her. Are you sure her angelic whiteness is not—flour-dust?"

Sarcasm is derived from *sarkazō*, a dog-like rending of the flesh. But everything depends upon the dog. There is the big-mouthed, iron-jawed brute, that rends like a hyena. And there is the gracefully lumbering puppy, as large as a sheep, as docile as a calf, as wise as an old crow, and his teeth are as so many needles. He playfully brings them together, with your finger between, and you—squeak. Janoca made no audible noise, but mentally she squeaked. Balthasar's words had a tooth-like sharpness. It was she who had always been the one to dwell upon the quality of the Phythian descent. It was she who never wearied of reminding Balthasar that it was part of his religious duty to marry none but a lady of fair degree.

"I thought you always said that it did not matter who she was, or what she was, so long as she was the one you cared for?" said Janoca lamely, and conscious of her lameness.

"Have I said that the lady of the mill is the one I care for? She is your choice, not mine. I shall want her to shake her dress every time before I go near to her."

He would like to have laughed out, for it was not often that he could get Janoca into a corner. But laughter would have spoiled the fun; so he kept his face grave and his tongue filed.

"I would as soon she had the dust of a flour-mill upon her as the dust of a coal-mine, brother, or the smell of beer upon her."

"And I would rather she had neither. The proper tang, Jano, is a smack of the soil. It is pleasant as the odour of this cigar. You were thinking of Lord Lyn-taille and Miss Charbon-de-Bois when you spoke of coal, I suppose? Ah, if I were only a lord, I would marry a mustard manufactory, I would espouse a lead-mine! But as plain Balthasar Phythian, I shrink from even a flour-mill."

"No, it is not that, Balthasar. What you are afraid of is—a wife! If the ceremony were all, and you could leave your bride honourably at the church-door, and never put eyes upon her again, there would be no difficulty in getting you to marry," said Janoca, in accents of reproach.

"That was a shrewd saying: Thou resemblest the spirit whom thou comprehend'st. I opine, Jano, that

we are both a bit loath to pass matrimonially *sub jugum*—that is to say, under the yoke.”

“You know nothing at all about it. I have never yet seen the man I should care to call husband; though more than one, as you know, brother, would have been glad to call me wife,” answered Janoca, with a grave inclination of her head, while a soft blush of modesty overspread her handsome face.

Seeing her just then, it was a distinct pleasure to know that, if she was still maiden, the fact was not due to that proverbial masculine obtuseness whereby, of women, the worse is so often taken and the better left.

“I know it, Jano. And being selfish, I have rejoiced that the race of men was so imperfect in your eyes. Jano, when I see a woman just like you, I will marry her at once.”

“You will? No, sir, you will not. She would not have you.”

“Don’t you think I should make an excellent husband, then?”

“Not for the *alter ego* of Janoca Phythian, sir. But for the woman you are going to have, you will make an excellent husband: a trifle odd, a bit sentimental; a shade too amiable, too philosophical, too learned. But still, on the whole, an excellent husband. Wayward, but kind; dappled with conceit as all men are, but

veined with sympathy as but few men are; fond of ideas, but not averse from action. A man whose nature is stocked full of the seeds whence spring the flower-like virtues that make a lovely mystery and charm of character. Only, in this particular man the seeds have not sprung yet. Yes, I think I could recommend you, brother, as a husband. You are at least a green twig and full of sap, while most men are without sap and are as brown branches," said Janoca, with great sobriety and equal candour, and an intonation as melodious and perfect as that of a mountain brook.

Balthasar laughed and said, "You had better write that out, Jano, in your neatest hand, and sign it. I will carry it in my pocket when I go a-wooing. If my wits should not sit close about me, and I should ever find myself hard up for something to say, I could pull it out and give it her to read. But seriously, though revenge may be sweet and pious and good to sleep upon, is it one's duty to damage one's self more than the enemy?"

"Yes. If you were dead, I would find a husband in less than a month, rather than Philip Phythian should ever have a penny of our money," answered Janoca. There was as little love in her mouth and eyes as in her words.

“Ah me! who were the happy people who used to lie down and die at pleasure? I could wish that the pleasant art was known to Englishmen. Jano, count me as one dead. I shall not object, not in the least. From this day forward, let me be nothing but an animated corpse in your eyes. I will announce myself to the world as defunct, if you will only do the marrying, and the bringing forth of the child whose existence, like a fierce sun, shall dry up the stream of Philip Phythian’s hopes. It is really your place to attend to such business, rather than mine.”

“No; you are not dead yet. Did I not say you were a green twig?”

“A breath only, Jano. It is not yet written down and signed. And if it were, I would empty the ink-pot on the phrase. I refuse to be a green twig any longer. I prefer to be a sort of withered fig-tree.”

“When your cigar is finished, we will go.”

“Go? Where?”

“To see the father of the—the lady of the mill, and get his consent. Nothing like striking while the iron is hot,” said Janoca, who thought that the debate had lasted long enough and the time had arrived for the *clôture*.

Balthasar, the minority, thought otherwise. Said he,

"You are right there. The iron should be hot when one strikes. But the iron is not hot, not even warm. It is cold, Jano, cold as a block of ice. We must do no striking to-day: besides, it is Sunday. You wouldn't surely have a man go hammering on the anvil of courtship on a Sunday?"

"The better the day the better the deed. The getting of a wife is as important a piece of business as the getting of an unfortunate one out of a pit."

"Only in this case, unhappily, it is the other way about. You would set the unfortunate one to dig his own pit," sighed Balthasar, who showed no inclination to hurry over his cigar.

"Well, brother, if I cannot cure your perversity of spirit, I must do my best to regulate your conduct. I am going to put my things on," said Janoca, rising.

Balthasar looked at her, almost startled. "It is madness!" he exclaimed; "the girl is already engaged."

It was Janoca's turn now to be startled. But she did not show it: her clasped hands tightened a little, and her mouth, instead of opening, grew firm. And that was all the outward expression there was of the sharp spasm of disappointment, that smote her like sudden pain. Her voice was under beautiful control

as she said, "That is unexpected news. Is it true, Balthasar?"

Balthasar looked at her for some moments in silence. He had a terrible habit of truthfulness, and he was realising its inconvenience. Should he tell a lie just for once? Possibly his moral palate would be all the better for a touch of bitter tonic. Possibly the world at large was wiser than he had given it credit for, and had discovered the medicinal virtue of a good round lie. Possibly when the Psalmist, in his haste to tell the truth for once, sang that all men were liars, he was saying little more than that cats love mint, and gastronomes olives. But Balthasar, being healthy, was a creature of prejudices; and almost against his conscience, which seemed to desire alliance with his judgment, he decided to stick to the truth.

"I cannot say for a fact that it is so. But a girl like that is sure to be engaged. She is the pick of the place."

"Ha! I thought I should have been sure to hear of it, if it really were so. You will find she is free, brother. I shall not be longer than a few minutes," said Janoca, passing from the room.

Balthasar sat listening until the soft footfall of his sister upon the stairs died away; then he sighed deeply,

and threw the stump of his cigar into the fire. Most of us know what it is to sit waiting, expecting the door every moment to open and the dentist to say with a bland smile, "Now, sir, I am ready, if you will step this way, please!" Balthasar was in a very similar state of mind. He had no definite thought in his mind; only a number of inconsequent ideas, broken, fragmentary, and rough-edged, filling him with sharp pains. While over all was a sense of the impending operation. Was he dreaming, or was he, on this bright and peaceful Sunday afternoon, actually going to put his hand to the matrimonial plough? The thing was so sudden, so unthought of, so absurd! He lay back in his chair and laughed outright at the waking dream.

Then the door opened, and Janoca said mellifluously, "I am ready, brother!"

Balthasar sprang to his feet as if shot, and answered, "So am I."

It was a brave word, and was bravely spoken; so much so, that Janoca marvelled greatly, and gave her brother a searching glance. He smiled placidly, and merely said, thinking of the dentist, "Well, I suppose it will soon be over!"

"Indeed, I hope not. You are not going to have a tooth drawn, you know."

Odd that she should have hit upon the very idea that was in his mind, thought Balthasar. He looked at Janoca and laughed. Then without another word they went forth upon their Great Adventure.

CHAPTER XII.

DEM MUTHIGEN HILFT GOTT!

IN Peakshire, the home of the beautiful, beauty is nowhere more at home than in the region round about Voe. And Voe itself had nothing prettier to show than the walk between the Chase and the mill. The highway from Voe to Yewdle Brig ran quite close to the back of the Chase, but the house was completely hidden from view by a lofty wall, green with lichen, and in summer dotted with the pink and blue and purple faces of the tiniest of the flowery tribes. Great chestnut-trees threw their branches over the wall.

Janoca and Balthasar went, not along the highway, but through their small park and the plantation beyond. They followed a mere grassy trail, that wound here and there, and up and down, as if its sole purpose had been to take in every fine point of observation and every rich patch of beauty: clumps of timber; sweet-voiced brooks; hollows full of bracken and rabbits; dingles where the snowdrops grew, and the primroses, and the wild roses, and the blackberry-bushes; slopes where centuries of rains had done their denuding work,

and the dark rocks showed their stern faces, with sometimes their naked head and shoulders; here the lone tall elm, home of the solitary crow, and there the low broad holly, from whose top the blackbird whistled; lowland meadows, where fat cattle lay blinking in the sunshine; and ploughed uplands, whence one could see valley after valley, and hill upon hill, and wild moorlands lying close against the sky and looking like short cuts to the kingdom of heaven. There followed a short steep descent through a wood, and then Janoca and Balthasar stood upon the highway, a few hundred yards above the mill.

Not a word had been spoken by either the whole way. Janoca had kept her eyes open all the time, and had never, she thought, enjoyed the walk more. But Balthasar had seen nothing but the ground in front of him, and some of the protruding stones that formed steps over the walls they had crossed—together with some stepping-stones across a couple of brooks, and a slender foot-bridge, with a broken hand-rail, which spanned a brawling stream, which, he always thought, ran as if it fancied the Scarthin could not get along without it.

Balthasar had been less occupied with his thoughts than with his sensations. He was immersed in a dreamy element of unreality. Oddly enough, however, the moment he stood upon the common turnpike road, this

medium of unreality vanished like a morning mist, and the outlines of things seemed strangely clear and hard.

"Jano, what is it you wish me to do? We are nearly there," he said, with the air of a man just awakened from sleep.

"You must get Mr. Boden's consent, of course," answered Janoca, smiling.

"Then that is all, is it?"

"No, not quite. The next thing is to get the lady of the mill to consent."

"To-day?"

"Yes, if possible."

"Ah! then you had better go on alone, and let them know I am coming next week, or—next year. I am going home," said Balthasar, turning round as he spoke.

Janoca's dark eyes opened wide with astonishment. "I do not understand you," she said, quietly. And in truth she did not. She did not know that her pliant subject had the making of a rebel in him. But he had, and just now he showed it.

"Issachar, being an ass, crouched between two burdens. I don't mind being a green twig, or even an animated corpse, but I draw the line at an ass. I do not feel that it is in my line, quite."

"If you will speak plain English, brother, my dull

wits will perhaps be equal to your meaning." This with a stately gravity of tone and manner.

"Well, I mean this: I will attempt the lady or the gentleman to-day, whichever you say; but not both in one day. To stand such burdens, I had need be a great oak, not a green twig."

Janoca not infrequently had her suspicions that Balthasar surreptitiously dealt in gentle irony and innocent malice. She would have been grieved had she been sure about it; but she was not sure. Indeed she secretly flattered herself that she alone was conscious of the saline quality that oft-times showed itself in her brother's speech. Thus the occasion of a wound was transformed into the pleasant tingling of self-complacency. And now, as he dropped that phrase, a green twig, she felt as though a pin had pricked her. She gave Balthasar a quick glance, but his face, as usual, gave no clue to his meaning.

"I have no desire to overweight you, Balthasar. I am anxious only to save time. But, after all, it is your affair, not mine; and you must choose your own method of accomplishing it. Suppose you try the miller to-day, and leave the other until to-morrow?" she said, as they went on.

"Week. I shall need a clear seven days' rest to recuperate. Well, it is a bargain. I try the miller only to-day. If they are both present, you will take the

lady in tow. If only the lady is to be seen, I do no work on the Sabbath-day. I wish her good day and retire. Nay, I will hear no objection. To-day it is the miller, and the miller only. Hallo! if she isn't there by the door!" exclaimed Balthasar, as they rounded the rickyard and faced the house.

"And a very pretty, genteel figure she makes," observed Janoca, quickening her pace, as if she thought there was some danger of Balthasar suddenly retreating.

Ruth came forward to meet them, her colour a little heightened by surprise.

"You know us, my dear, of course. I am Janoca Phythian, and this is my brother," said Janoca, putting on her sweetest smile.

"Oh yes, I know you very well. I have often seen you at church," answered Ruth, taking Janoca's proffered hand. Then her eyes rested upon the face of "Gentleman" Phythian, the little monster of legal lore, who veiled his despotic temperament with the most engaging urbanity. Years ago, as a child, she had dreamed about him, and in her dreams he had mingled, not incongruously, with the figures of Bluebeard and Red-Ridinghood's ironical wolf. And though the mantle of mystery which her young imagination had woven for him had long since been, not worn out so much as folded up and put away, with many other strange and fond costumes and trappings, into some dim attic of

memory, Balthasar Phythian had not yet taken rank among ordinary men in her eyes. The touch of her imagination was still upon him, and in virtue thereof he was not as other men. Never before had she been so close to him or looked into his eyes. She looked at him so intently that Balthasar wondered if she could read her destiny in his eyes. He raised his hat and made her one of his best bows,—and not a dozen men in England knew the art and mystery of a bow better than he did. Then Ruth dropped her eyes, embarrassed, greatly startled at her own fearlessness. Would he think her bold? The colour burned hot in her cheeks. Balthasar saw and understood, and was glad, though he was sorry for her.

Said Janoca, who also had the art of divination, “My brother would like to see your father for a while. Is he within?”

“Yes. Will you come forward, please?” said Ruth. She was for sending them round, through the garden, to the front door, while she went in through the kitchen to open it.

But Janoca said, “If your kitchen, my dear, is as sweet and fresh as mine, it is fit for a duchess to enter. We will go with you.”

“I have only Jane to help me, Miss Phythian, while you have three or four servants,” said Ruth.

“That is true; but the Chase is a large house, and

this is a small one. Are you the fine lady, my dear? or do you help Jane at all with the work?"

"Jane does the heavy work, and what I may call the dirty work. But that leaves me plenty to do, Miss Phythian," answered Ruth.

Balthasar, watching her closely, saw the colour rise faintly, and a beautiful dignity in the carriage of her head develop itself in a flash.

"I am glad to hear it. It is the only way in which a woman, be she high or low, can become a good housewife. And, my dear, let me tell you a secret,—good housewifery can do more for the world than all the theology and the politics in creation. Marry a revolutionist to a first-rate housewife, and he will become transformed into the image of a sleek optimist. At the bottom of all hardness of heart, fanaticism, insanity, privy conspiracy, and rebellion is—bad housewifery."

Janoca never lectured or declaimed, much less ranted. She uncoiled her womanly doctrine as naturally and nimbly as a spider its web. Ruth liked the doctrine well; somehow it left the taste of honey in her mouth. She liked, also, the voice in which it was uttered, so soft, so cultivated, so full of what sounded like the melody, the incommunicable and inimitable melody, of the soul unseen. She looked at Balthasar

to see how he took it; and with a smile visible in his eyes only, he said—

“You know, Miss Boden, we all admire most our own peculiar excellence. If we didn’t, we should have very little excuse for being so narrow in sympathy and so lop-sided in virtue.”

“Thank you, brother, for your left-handed compliment. I would rather distribute my excellence over my whole being, I grant you, and wear it—as some gentlemen do their vices—like a skin. But failing that, I will, if need be, carry my excellence as Mr. Punch carries his hump. Who, I should like to know, would now care to see Mr. Punch with a straight back?”

“Turn the gentleman to the wall, and he would make a first-rate hat-stand. By your leave, Jano, men shall not turn my virtues into pegs, on which to hang their greasy caps.”

“And by your leave, brother, that is about all that our best virtues are fit for.”

“Ah! well, when you grow humble, it ill becomes me to wax proud. The green twig has now become a hat-stand! Miss Boden, are you in need of such a piece of furniture? It will be sold cheaply, I assure you,” said Balthasar, with comical gravity.

“I am not fond of second-hand furniture, sir,” answered Ruth, laughing at her own daring.

“Very well said, my dear, very well said. Brother,

that was a light shaft, but well sped. Confess it, now," said Janoca.

"My self-esteem has had one of its two eyes put out. If she would dub me old and rickety, I should be led home dark—dark but happy, Jano," replied Balthasar, with a meaning that lurked not in his words but in his tone.

Janoca understood him perfectly. "I think we had better go in," she said, taking Ruth's hand in her own. They went in, followed by—the piece of second-hand furniture. The kitchen was fleckless: so also was the large old living-room, with its massive oak beams overhead, and great open fire-place. A study in the antique was this room, thought Balthasar, and much he would have liked to spend some time in it. But the women-folk passed through it without stopping, and so came to the best room of the house, into which Balthasar followed them. This was a modern room, and well furnished, and, thought Balthasar, utterly commonplace and contemptible beside the piece of quaint antiquity adjoining. There he had caught sight of a lovely old spinning-wheel standing in the corner by the black oak clock-case. Here his eyes rested upon a smart piano of newest make. Spinster *versus* pianist. Balthasar's sympathy and preference inclined towards the elder figure. The image was richer in every token of true worth. Yet she, the living pianist, was not wanting in

tokens of true worth. Somehow she seemed full worthy even to sit at the wheel and work the work of the good women of old time. So thought Balthasar, as he stood back and held open the door for her to pass out. She smiled, and bowed her thanks with lovely grace and almost queenly graciousness.

"A miller's daughter, and a piano-player! She ought to be a young countess. Young Abel Boden, the blacksmith, you know, looks like an inspired Italian artist, I often think. And here is another piece of irony incarnate. A girl, who ought to be a showy shallow piano-strumming hoyden, has the grace of a Penelope, and the sense of a—a——Ah! I don't think any woman was ever famous for sense, was she, Jano?"

"I am glad you think so well of her," remarked Janoca, ignoring her brother's banter. Then she added sapiently, "You may be inclined to think she is perfection now. It is the way with you impulsive men. But, take my word for it, she is not anything of the kind. If she were, she would be too good——"

"For you to care for her as a sister-in-law, eh?" interpolated Balthasar.

"Yes, if you like it better so. I am your sister, you know. I do not believe in your perfect women. There is no salt to them. As pieces of imagination, they are inferior even to angels. And only a third-rate poet would now dabble with angels."

"I think women are, as you say, inferior to angels in one respect. They marry and are given in marriage. In that respect, I think the angelic custom is the better. Oh, Jano, Jano! do you realise what you have brought me here to do?"

"I would rather ask, brother, do you realise what you have to do?"

"No, thank heaven, I don't quite! If I did, I should feel like a cipher with the rim knocked off."

"Tut, tut! do not be a coward. *Dem Muthigen hilft Gott!*"

"Cold comfort that, Jano. *Der muthige Mann* can help himself; while such as I need a battalion of angels at their back. I think we had better order a couple of sacks of flour, and get away home again."

"We don't usually buy flour on Sunday. If our father had been like his son, I fear our mother would have died a spinster."

"I wish to goodness he had married somebody else; and then, whoever I might have been, I should not have been myself."

"What in the world will you say next! Before I forget, brother, do not forget to remind Mr. Boden that it is a Phythian—a Phythian of Cottesley—who seeks the hand of his daughter in marriage."

"Why, certainly. He knows I am Balthasar Phythian without me telling him."

“You know what I mean, brother. With people like him, blood——”

Just then the door opened and the miller came in, with a face like the rising sun. He was a shy and awkward man with his betters, and especially in the presence of ladies. He stood now like a bashful boy “of hugy bulk,” and said, “Good day to you, ma’am, and to you, sir.”

“My father-in-law!” mentally ejaculated Balthasar. “Glad Penelope is not by. He would shame her.”

Meanwhile Janoca, with the deft art of which she was an accomplished mistress, was bringing back the truant self-possession of the miller, and setting his wits upon their feet again. A few words, a few tones, a few muscular movements, a few strange passes of the soul, and the subtile work was done. How it was done was a secret hidden in the deepest recesses of her spiritual organisation. When she was so minded, Janoca, being a woman, had an infinite capacity for irritating. But her normal influence was soothing; and when her will became engaged, she could work upon one’s spirit like soft rain upon the heaving waters.

For some minutes the talking was monopolised by Janoca, while Balthasar dreamed, and the miller sat listening, assenting, and inwardly wondering what it all meant, and how it came about that some folk seemed to be born with their insides full of words, while others

had to catch them flying, as bats belated moths. Presently Ruth came into the room, whereupon Janoca rose and said—

“Come and show me your quaint old garden, my dear. I want to have a talk with you.” And together they left the room.

Now was Balthasar’s hour upon him. He came out of his dream, and fixed his glance steadily upon the miller in silence. The miller bore it bravely for a time, then he got restless.

“It’s mighty strange what talking machines some folks be,” he said finally, with an effort.

“You are thinking of my sister? I tell her sometimes that she has the words and I have the ideas; and if we could exchange half of our stock-in-trade, it would be a great advantage.”

“Nay, but she’s a powerful pretty talker. I could have sat an hour longer listening to her sweet voice.”

“You are a widower, are you not?” asked Balthasar suddenly, as the thought struck him—why should not the miller marry Janoca?

“Yes, sir, many a long year. But I don’t say I wouldn’t marry again, if the right woman came along.”

“Dear me! But I suppose one can get accustomed to anything. Now, I am a bachelor, as you know, Mr. Boden, and could you, with your experience of matrimony, recommend me to try it?”

The miller broke out into a hearty laugh—a rare thing with him nowadays.

“Happen I could, sir. It’s good for the temper, anyway. It tries it,” he answered, laconically.

“The quality of my temper I know; it has been tried so often. What else is matrimony good for?”

“Good for the purse. It empties it. And so saves it from wearing out so soon, eh?”

“I understand. Proceed, please.”

“To cap all, it’s good for life, sir. It shortens it,” said the miller, with a touch of grim humour.

“Three most excellent points. You have a daughter, Penelope?”

“It is Ruth you mean, sir.”

“You know her as Ruth. To me she is Penelope. She needs a husband. A girl should always marry young—and such a girl! I need a wife. Strictly speaking, it is not a wife I need, but a child, an heir. And our social arrangements are so clumsy that I cannot get the rose without the thorn. I must have the flower, and hence the necessity of getting a fit and proper tree to bear it. Should you have any objection, Mr. Boden, to me paying my addresses to your daughter, Miss Penelope?”

If the slender gentleman in front of him had been suddenly transformed into a faun with pointed ears and goatish hoofs, the miller could hardly have been more

astonished than he was at his words. He brought his hands down upon his knees with a slap, and stared at Balthasar incredulously. "Happen I don't understand you aright, sir. Be it that you want to court my Ruth?" he said, as though he could not believe his own ears.

"Yes; in the vernacular, that is my meaning."

"Well, well, well! that beats anything I ever heard of. It's nation strange, sir."

"What is strange?"

"That a gentleman of your quality should take a liking to my Ruth. Not but what she's a proper girl enough. Clean and handy, and—and a bit of the lady in her. But you're a Phythian, sir."

"Yes, Balthasar Phythian is my name. And I suppose there has been a Balthasar Phythian in direct line now for—well, I think we generally prefer to start with the reign of Henry VIII. In that reign—which was a goodly time for a shrewd man employed in his Majesty's service—my ancestor, by kingly favour, carved out for himself a snug estate from the confiscated abbey lands of Cottesley. His father, I believe, was also Balthasar. But he was a rusty, dusty, devil-driven old scrivener; and I do not suppose the thoroughbred Phythians of Cottesley would have recognised him for an instant, if it had not been necessary to find a father for his son. In all of which matters my sister is well posted; and

she will entertain you by the hour, if ever you have any time to waste. For myself, Mr. Boden, I am more interested in hearing your answer to my question." For a while the miller sat thinking, ever and anon breaking the silence with a "Well, well, well!" or a "Who'd have thought it!" or a "Beats anything I ever heard." Balthasar, finding the time to drag, fell a-dreaming.

"Might I make bold to ask, do you love Ruth, sir?"

Balthasar opened his eyes and looked up, and said quickly, "Oh dear, no! Not in the least. Hei! how very thoughtless of me! Yet the truth is the truth. And after all, it does not matter much. A man must love his wife, of course. That is the anodyne of matrimony. But I do not know that it is anywhere written that a man must love his—his—in the vernacular—sweetheart. I can see that there is no objection to his doing so, but it is not by commandment. Now, Miss Penelope is not even my—sweetheart. And I submit, Mr. Boden, that neither law nor gospel contains a hint that a man, a virtuous man, should love a charming girl who is neither sweetheart nor wife."

"Well, that's a queer notion and no mistake. Happen there's sense in it, though, when you get o' th' inside. But it's a nut, sir, and must be cracked before you get at the meat. You wouldn't ask to marry her without loving her a bit, sir, would you?"

"I am sure I do not know. On the spur of the moment, however, I think I may say that I would. But it is a matter on which I should be entirely guided by Jano. Jano is my sister, you know."

At this the miller looked grave and shook his head. "Where there's love on both sides, marriage isn't all cakes and ale, sir. And without it, the Lord only knows what it's like," he said, after a pause.

"But if the lady does not mind, why should you?"

"Happen as Ruth wouldn't have you, sir, if you didn't love her."

"That would be awkward, I admit. I don't love her now, however, and what would be the use of saying I did? Suppose we——"

"Asking your pardon, Mr. Phythian, but how would you court her, if you didn't make love to her?"

"I do not know, I am sure. But one cannot make bricks without straw, and I have no straw. If I could not make love, I should have to try and make something else that she would like as well. Really, I think my sister ought to settle the difficulty. I should like to see her puzzled a bit."

"Then shall we put that by for a while?"

"With the greatest pleasure in the world, my dear sir. Let me see: I have already dwelt, as per order, on the fact that it is 'a Phythian—a Phythian of Cottesley—who seeks the hand of your daughter in marriage.'"

"Yes, sir, and I'm mighty proud of it, too. The Phythians, as everybody knows, have got good blood in their veins, and lots of good money to back it up. I'd as soon she married you, sir, as the Squire himself, damn him!" Quite impromptu was the expletive, and startled the miller almost as much as it did Balthasar.

"Goodness me! what a mercy you are not the Almighty!" ejaculated Balthasar.

"I ask your pardon, sir. I didn't know it was so nigh my tongue's-end, or I'd have swallowed it," said the miller, with some confusion of face.

"Ah! then I am glad you dropped it. There is such a thing as indigestion of the soul; and swallowed curses are apt to bring it on. Surely the Squire is one of the last men deserving of a curse."

"Happen he is, but he's gone and got the better on me anent that strip of land by the Scarthin, and—Lord, sir, if I didn't swear it out now and then, I should choke!"

"What! the Jack Wragg land that you and Mr. Sims fought for at the sale?"

"The very same, sir. That new blacksmith fellow has gone and sold it to him for just what he gave for it."

"Has he really? At any rate, he has paid a fancy price for it."

"He'd have paid double, and jumped at it. And so would I, rather than he should have had it now. And to think, sir, that villain Kneebone as good as promised to let me have it!"

"Ah! I see now why he is a villain. He has favoured your rival. If that does not prove a man a villain, I should like to know what would."

"So say I, sir."

"By the by, talking of the blacksmith reminds me. Is he keeping on that naturalist nephew of yours?"

"Yes," growled the miller.

"I am glad to hear it. What with his beautiful Italian face and his scientific proclivities, he makes quite a picturesque figure for a village blacksmith. I understand you have never heard anything of his father, from the day he disappeared?"

"That is so," answered the miller, and involuntarily he put his hand to his nether lip. The undying smart was still there. It was evident that he had no desire to pursue the subject, for he said quite abruptly, "I'm not a poor man, Mr. Phythian." Balthasar looked surprised at the irrelevant remark, but said nothing. The miller seemed uneasy at this, and moved about in his chair. At last he said, "If she marries to my fancy, I'll give her from five to ten thousand pounds down. And as much, happen, when I die."

"Well, the man who despises money is a fool, be he bachelor or bridegroom."

"That's marrow truth, let who will deny it. I don't want, though, to pour my money into an empty box. Money to money, say I, and then it'll breed well. But if she goes contrarious to me, she'll just get one shilling of my money, neither more nor less."

"It is all very well to say that, before your daughter is married. It is conducive to reflection on the part of a sensible girl. But I should hope that when the thing was done, and [could not be undone, you would not bite your thumb at the inevitable in that way."

"Wouldn't I, though! If she makes her bed, she shall lie on it."

"That is all the more reason, then, that I should know at the start, for her sake, whether or not you are favourable to my suit," said Balthasar.

At this the miller put on his gravest expression of countenance, and did his best to look as though he were seriously considering the matter. But the effort was too great, and in a little while his face broke out into a broad smile as the strong proud laughing joy of his heart rose within him like a tide. His eyes grew bright and his face red as he smote his open palm with his right fist, exclaiming, "Why, it beats my best dream out and out! Mrs. Balthasar Phythian of the Chase!

Sounds like poetry! Ay, you may have her, sir, and proud I am to be her father. Shall I call her in and tell her it's all arranged?"

Balthasar sprang to his feet as the miller rose, and said, "My dear sir, stop! not for the world! A bargain is a bargain. I will see Miss Penelope this day week. I will go now and find Jano. Good day, Mr. Boden. Much obliged."

He went out quickly, closed the door behind him, and catching sight of the key in the lock, he quietly turned it.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN A GREEN BOWER.

LEFT alone, and all unconscious that he was a prisoner in his own house, the miller reseated himself, and soon became lost in thought. He rehearsed again and again the scene he had just gone through with Balthasar Phythian, until by sheer dint of repetition the whole thing lost every vestige of reality, and took on the semblance of a dream. And yet it was no dream; for had not Ruth roused him from his regular Sunday afternoon sleep, with the surprising remark that Mr. and Miss Phythian were down-stairs, waiting to see him in the parlour? How else came he to be in the parlour, instead of on his bed?

Yet it was passing strange that "Gentleman" Phythian, whom everybody counted a confirmed bachelor, should have taken a fancy to his Ruth. Questionless, the girl had got it in her to carry her head higher than was warranted by her forebears. And for the same, he had rated her more than once, and cast clumsy sarcasms in her face, and broadly hinted that the time would come, as it always came for the likes of her,

when a clownish ploughman would be reckoned a god-send. But even he would not be on hand, and she would shrivel into a sere and sour old maid. It was not so to be, it seemed; nathless it might have been so. And who but a born idiot would have counted on a gentleman wanting to marry her? Fancy Ruth the wife of Balthasar Phythian! the sister-in-law of Miss Phythian!! the mistress of the Chase!!! Oh, it was a sweet dream, a strange dream, a wondrous dream! It teemed with multitudinous images full of enchantment, which began to move to and fro in rhythmic order, to the sound of interior music sweet as the sackbut, the psaltery, and the harp, intermingled with the soft melody of the Scarthin that came up from the vale below. His eyes closed, his head dropped, he snored for a short time most unpoetically; then he fell to breathing softly, slowly, and deeply. And sleeping he dreamed the same dream, only it was interwoven through and through with images of horror and terror. Ruth grew into a countess dressed in purple velvet, who pulled out of her pocket a golden crown. She would have shown him how she looked with it upon her head, but that he had to leave her suddenly and fly, to escape a dread figure in black and red who was ever pursuing him. It was the figure of Abel his brother; but it was not Abel. Men whispered that it was the figure of Justice, and from its attire it was in search of a mur-

derer. Yet he hid, and it passed by, and Ruth the countess once more appeared, with the purple velvet gown and the crown in her pocket, and—the figure in black and red came also! And still the miller slept on.

Meanwhile the Phythians had gone. Janoca had seemed in no hurry to leave. She had discussed vegetables with Ruth, and butter-making, and flower-growing, and had just got fairly started on the ever sweet theme of the bees, when Balthasar came upon the scene. To Ruth he seemed as composed as an oyster; but Janoca, being versed in subtile signs, perceived that he was excited. Ordinarily, his mental condition would have furnished no sufficient reason, in Janoca's eyes, why the bees should not have had full justice done them; but just then her curiosity was a-tiptoe. So she dropped the bees as though they had stung her, and with a few pretty sentences, that came from her lips as naturally as honey from a hive, she took her departure.

Ruth accompanied them to the lane; then she came back and went into the garden at the back of the house, and sat on a rustic bench in a little ivy-covered bower, with the warm April sun in her eyes. It was a late spring, and nature had done next to nothing as yet towards decking herself in the soft delicacies of colour. But there was, nevertheless, a kind of still rapture to

be drunk from the yellow and purple crocuses, the chaste snowdrops, the flowering whiterock, and the tender green leaves and ruby-red stalks of the greatly daring and frost-defying rhubarb. And Ruth, being a true child of nature, found herself thirsty, and gladly drank of the quiet delight. With the delicate scent of the whiterock mingled, like another perfume of equal sweetness, the memory of Miss Phythian. Her sweet and stately manner, that so well matched the nobility of her countenance and the inimitable charm of her voice, had struck Ruth like a sudden flood of rich and rare music.

Twelve months earlier she had gone for the first time through the Duke's palace, and had therein seen the mellow painting of a certain countess of ineffable loveliness. For weeks and months afterwards the picture haunted her, and bred in her a wild longing, a delicious despair. Janoca Phythian had nothing of the magic beauty of the dead lady, but she had that which was beauty's beauty—the spell and sorcery of manner and voice. Moreover, she was alive, and had stood face to face with Ruth, and had talked of fowls and flowers and fruits, of the art and mystery of making preserves that would keep, and butter that her grandmother would have recognised without a label.

There was a certain pine-tree in the woods, that had been blown down by a heavy wind a few seasons

back. The base of its trunk was a huge mass of up-torn clay held together by a network of roots. When the summer sun was dipping in the west, its red lights fell straight upon the roots of the fallen tree, and burned a mysterious crimson splendour into the mass of imprisoned clay. More than once Ruth had stood at a distance and looked on with feelings akin to his who looked upon the bush burning yet unconsumed. Somehow it seemed to her, just now, that everything Janoca had touched upon had become transfigured like the pine-root. The touch, the enchanting touch, of ladyhood was upon them. And what is there of base that will not become noble, of mean that will not wax splendid, of vulgar that will not grow refined, of commonplace that will not burn with the beauty of the divinely rare, under the touch of ladyhood? Be it what it may, it is fit only to be cast out and trodden under foot of men.

Suddenly Ruth heard a footstep, and looking up, beheld Violet Chalk. She was a woman of about eight-and-twenty, in height and build much resembling Ruth herself; she was a handsome woman, with bright colour in her cheeks, laughing brown eyes, and full red lips. She looked brimful of healthy animal life and passion, and in her maiden days had wrought sad havoc in the hearts of the young men of Voe, and of more than one neighbouring hamlet. Yet after all, she

had gone and thrown herself away upon Silas Chalk, one of the Squire's under-keepers, a thin-faced fellow, surly when sober and quarrelsome when drunk, and jealous up to the hilt. Everybody looked to see Violet lose her bright and warm if somewhat coarse beauty, and gay jaunty manner, within a year of her wedding-day. But over two years had now gone by, and still she was neither pale nor sad, but brave and handsome as ever. If she suffered, she was determined the world should be none the wiser. And with the instinct of courage and defiance, she seldom left the house until the looking-glass informed her that every trace of private sorrow was veiled. Her sole confidant was Ruth, between whom and herself there existed a peculiar intimacy. From the time when Ruth was two years old, until she was married, Violet had been her nurse, her playmate, her guardian, her worshipper, her friend and counsellor. She had kept the miller's house for some years, after the death of his wife, and had trained Ruth to be the capital housewife she was. Only Ruth knew what the matrimonial tapestry of Violet's life really was, upon its seamy side. And only Violet knew upon what bough Ruth had hung her heart's nest. In this exchange of joy and sorrow, the equality must needs have been marred but for the really fine sympathy that characterised both the woman and the girl.

"I saw you had company, Miss Ruth, when I came,

so I sat down by one of the ricks, and I'm not sure I didn't almost fall asleep. I do so love the sunshine," said Violet, standing in front of Ruth.

"Yes, I knew that before to-day, Violet; and so do I. But I don't think I love it so much by itself as when I see it and feel it working itself into the earth. I am afraid I am not very heavenly-minded. It is the earth I love, more than the sky or the sun—the dear sweet beautiful earth!" exclaimed Ruth, with the poetic fervour of all true strong love.

"Yes, you are fit to be his lady-love. And you will make a bonnie pair some day, both of you a bit mad on the 'dear sweet beautiful earth.' But you will grow wiser when you are married, both of you."

"I hope so, Violet. It would be sad if we didn't," said Ruth, with a blush.

"Do you know, I have been thinking, Miss Ruth, you might as well almost marry a gamekeeper as him."

"Violet, for shame! What do you mean?"

"Well, then, a poacher, if you won't have gamekeeper. They are much of a muchness, happen."

"You mean that he is out at night so much? Oh, he would give that up, or I could go with him."

Violet Chalk gave a short laugh, full and ringing and melodious. It was a laugh that went with her constitution, and was full of signification for a psycho-

logist. Such power of laughter stood to trouble and sorrow, much as a dog's power of shaking himself stood to water.

"That would last till the honeymoon grew full, and no longer. If I had the saying of 'Yes' again, I would say 'No' to the best man as ever wore shoe-leather, if he had to turn out o' nights. But there—where's Jane?"

"She has not come back from church yet."

"And the miller?"

"I expect he has gone to lie down again. I think I will step in and see," answered Ruth, rising and going towards the house.

"I have got something to tell you, Miss Ruth; but we will talk in the house, if you like," said Violet Chalk, as she tripped along at the heels of the proud-stepping girl whom she still mentally acknowledged as mistress.

At one end of the house there were three or four stone steps, which Ruth descended. Through a small round hole in an old worm-eaten door she thrust two of her long and lovely white fingers, and shooting back a wooden bolt, opened the door, and entered that paradise of romance, luxury, and sweetness—an old-fashioned dairy. The roughly built stone walls were white as the driven snow; the red-tiled floor flecklessly clean. The temperature was low, and the air fresh

and sweet as the moor-breeze. There stood metal creaming-pans, broad and long, whose surfaces were mighty lakes of butyraceous scum, of unknown depth. On blue-grey slabs of stone, all round the room, stood huge brown earthenware pots with purple ears, full of the same divine liquor in half-a-dozen stages of sweetness. Through the open door the sun stole in coyly for a few feet and lay on the spotless crimson floor, as if amazed to find such delicate freshness and purity in a place that seemed sacred to the shades. Another moment and the stealthy intruder was thrust out, by the closing of the door in his face, and left lying on the green old bricks and the friendly steps of well-worn grit. These knew him well enough, and were glad of his company, though they generally hailed him as a stranger, seeing that though he claimed to pass that way daily, he had what seemed an ill-bred trick of often hiding his face.

Leaving the dairy, Ruth ascended a flight of steps that led into a passage, dim and narrow, that lay between the antique living-room and the parlour wherein the miller sat sleeping. The best room being but seldom used, it was customary to keep the door locked. So when Ruth tried the door and found it locked, with the key as usual on the outside, she naturally concluded that her father was not there. The living-room was empty, but the miller's Sunday hard-head was on

its proper hook, and his stick of knotted ash rested against the clock-case in the corner. Evidently the miller had decided to finish his Sunday nap, in proper orthodox fashion, on his own broad bed, four-posted and tent-like. Ruth stepped to the open stairs door and gently closed it; then she came and stood at the entrance of the passage.

"He doesn't mean to let his visitors lose him his regular Sunday sleep, it seems," remarked Violet Chalk, who knew the ways of the miller and his household to the smallest details.

"Yet he was fast asleep when they came. Violet, why cannot I be like Miss Phythian?"

"An old maid? Happen because somebody won't let you. And I don't think you are cut out for that kind of life either, Miss Ruth."

"You foolish thing! I didn't mean that, of course. I am thinking that maidenhood and marriage have very little to do with it. Somehow the memory of her is like that of a sweet old song—like one of the songs of Zion, to those who sat by the rivers of Babylon. She is a noble woman, I am sure."

"I fancy I like the gentleman better than the lady. But then, happen I commonly do. It's the way with most of the women, I'm thinking."

"Perhaps to their sorrow, Violet. Yes, I like Mr. Phythian; he is—but you have something to tell me?"

"Oh, it will keep. It's only a little message from my lord."

"Oh, Violet, and you haven't told me yet! Tell me at once."

"He wanted to know if you could meet him this evening between seven and eight, in the King's Lot?"

A glad answer sprang to her lips, but a true and delicate instinct checked its utterance. A wave of splendid colour ebbed and flowed in her face, as she stood in the attitude of reflection. "Yes," she said, quietly, "I think I can, between half-past seven and eight. Shall you see him again?"

Violet Chalk looked at the clock, and said, smiling, "In ten minutes he will be in the plantation, if he isn't there now."

"Oh, Violet, dare I, just for a minute?"

"Why not? Your father won't be down for an hour yet. I will stay here, in case he should come down—if you like, Miss Ruth?"

Just then there was a low hum of voices, and going to the window Ruth beheld Jane standing by the gate that gave into the lane, in conversation with her lover. "No, there is Jane, so you need not stay, thank you. And I shall not need you in the plantation either," said Ruth, as they left the house.

The two lovers had instinctively sought the momentary shelter of a rick ere they parted. So that Ruth

came upon them almost unawares: the girl looked extremely innocent, but the man doffed his cap, wriggled his legs as if trying to put them into his pockets, and waxed red in the face. Said Ruth, "I shall be back in a little while, Jane. Look after the house, and when you go in take care not to waken your master. He is asleep in his room." Then she passed on, and down the lane, with Violet Chalk, while Jane remained with her lover beside the rick. . . .

Meanwhile Miller Boden had been having *un mauvais quart d'heure*. Awakened by Ruth trying the door, he stretched out his legs and inwardly thanked his stars that his nap had been comparatively sweet and refreshing. He had come to be content with small mercies; he had composed a scale of comparative horrors; and not to awake with a start and in a cold sweat, was to have a grand sleep! He was on the point of leaving the room, when he heard the voices of Ruth and Violet Chalk within a few feet of the door, near which he happened to be sitting. He had no thought of listening to their conversation, which he did not for a moment suppose would possess any attractions for him. But suddenly, with almost startling distinctness, he caught the words of Violet Chalk, "An old maid? Happen because somebody won't let you." Thereat he pricked his ears, and bent sideways to listen. Presently he rose with infinite precaution from his chair, and with a

cat's tread went close to the door and bent his ear to the keyhole. There he remained, crouched and cramped, until he heard them go away out of the house. Then he straightened himself up, and his big red face could hardly be said to be black as thunder, seeing that it was still red. To his great disgust he was unable to hear more than snatches of the conversation—stray words and broken sentences only. There might have been a gusty wind blowing, the way their voices rose and fell and their tones changed. But though he had not heard much, he had heard enough to fill him with suspicion. Was it possible that Ruth had a secret lover? No; that was not like Ruth. And yet there was certainly a man in conversation, for he had caught Ruth's enquiry—"Shall you see him again?" Who could it be?

The miller battered his brains to discover a likely beguiler among the men of Voe, but all to no purpose. There was not one whom he could think that Ruth would care for. Yes, there was one—one with a face and manner and individuality such as might beguile any girl who was not separated from him by a bridgeless gulf. Ruth in love with her cousin Abel! The miller shuddered, scratched his lower lip, and mentally threw the idea, with a suppressed curse, into the limbo reserved for damnable ideas. Perhaps, after all, he was only making a mountain out of a mole-hill. He

would keep his eyes a little more open, and hasten on the Phythian affair. Ah, there was juicy sweetness in that thought! In three short months Ruth might be the wife of Balthasar Phythian; then it would be for her husband to look after her.

The miller went to the door, tried it, turned the handle this way and that, shook it again and again, and finally bent down and peered into the crevice between the door and the jamb—it was locked! Then was his face a sight to see. It was a magnificent crimson, dappled with purple. She, Ruth—the hussy!—had actually locked him in! It was a confirmation of his worst suspicions; there was some deep plot in it. He was too wroth to swear, until he looked at the window; then he swore deep and loud. Had it been a modern window, with a sash, he would have been through it in no time; but it was one of your old-fashioned leaded windows, with diamond panes, opening in a small section that did not afford room for his head, to say nothing of his big frame. He pulled out of his pocket a large jack-knife, and spent several minutes trying to shoot back the lock; but he could not manage it. Then he knocked loudly on the door, and called out, “Ruth! Jane! Ruth!” No one answered. Thereupon he sat down and did his best to play the philosopher; but it was hard work instead of play, as most folk find out when they make the endeavour.

For a while his anger burned fiercely towards Ruth—a thing which rarely happened, for she was his all in all. Presently it occurred to him that if Ruth had locked the door, knowing him to be within, she would certainly have chosen some other spot than the passage in which to talk with Violet Chalk. Like a flash he saw that he had misjudged Ruth. This was no small relief to him; it took off a heavy load from his mind.

The Phythian aspect of affairs recurred to him; his spirits began to rise; the humorous side of the situation showed itself in brief spells, like glimpses of a blue sky through sudden rifts in the clouds. But again a disquieting thought seized upon him. Why did Ruth choose the passage to talk in? Was it because she thought he was up-stairs, and would be less likely to overhear her? Turn it which way he would, this seemed to be the likeliest reason. But then he had already misjudged the girl once, and maybe if his wits were clearer, he would see that he was misjudging her again. He was so thinking when he heard some one in the living-room. He knocked loudly, and said, "Open the door." Whereupon Jane, thinking only of robbers, and startled out of her love-sick wits, began to scream.

"Unlock the door, and don't be an idiot!" cried the miller, lustily.

The girl recognised the voice of her master, and cried, "Where be you, sir?"

"Where? Why, here, in the best room, locked in like a prisoner."

Jane unlocked the door, and throwing it open, gasped, "Lord-a-mercy, master! what brings you locked in here?"

"Your mistress, I suppose. I was asleep, and I daresay she thought I was up-stairs."

"She did that, for certain. She said as much when she went down the lane."

"Well, you needn't say anything to her about it when she comes back; happen it would trouble her a bit. I'll have some tea as soon as you can get it ready."

CHAPTER XIV.

WEN GOTT BETRÜGT, DER IST WOHL BETROGEN.

“GOOD day, Mr. Phythian, and I hope you are in good health, sir? I was a-wondering if you would come to-day, sir, after what you said last Sunday.”

“It has been a curious week, Mr. Boden. Some of the days have gone like hours, and some of the hours like days. Jano, my sister, has made light of my condition. I was to walk in the park at midnight and seek the sweet influences of the moon. She even advised me to turn poet of a sudden, and try the effect of a sonnet inscribed to ‘Penelope.’ But I did not come to talk with you. Is Miss Penelope within?”

“Yes; she’s somewhere about, sir. Happen she’s in the bower in the back-garden.”

“In the bower in the back-garden? That sounds quite pretty—much better than, ‘In the parlour playing the piano.’ Miller, tell me, is the lady devoted to that instrument?”

“Well, no, sir—not that I know on. You see, she’s fond of music, as she ought to be, for I paid a pretty penny to teach her; but she likes the organ, sir, better

than the piano. I'd as lief have a hurdy-gurdy as either, as far as I'm concerned."

"Thank heaven for taste—I mean hers, not yours, miller. Yours, if you will allow your prospective son-in-law to say so, is villanously bad. Musically, you deserve—I speak as your prospective son-in-law—to be damned. A piano is a weak instrument, fit only for women of the weaker sort. Fancy a Miriam, to say nothing of a Moses, playing the piano! Now, an organ of proper dimensions has the melody and power and beauty of all other noble instruments combined. In the ear of a dying saint, its soft ecstatic sweetness may form a fit prelude to the mighty music of seraphim and cherubim, of which the first notes are already breaking in upon his spirit, trembling and eager for its great flight; while its mellow thunder and proud tumultuous gladness are equal to the march of a triumphant king at the head of a great host of veterans, seasoned with war and flushed with conquest. In the bower in the back-garden. No; don't lead me—direct me. I will go to her alone. One word—does she expect me?"

"I gave her a hint, sir."

"She knows my errand, then?"

"Happen she does, sir."

"I am glad she does. Round the corner there; thank you. Without doubt I shall easily find the 'bower in the back-garden.'" So saying, Balthasar

Phythian left the miller in the courtyard, and proceeded to the back-garden. It was a delightful old garden, especially in summer-time, full of currant-trees and gooseberry-bushes, beehives and sweet-smelling flowers, pear-trees, plum-trees, cherry-trees, and apple-trees, quaint and homely, that threw out their branches low down as if to invite sweet-hearted people like themselves to sit upon them and gently sway themselves in the sunshine. There were box-hedges in the garden, and beautiful holly-trees; ivy covered all the back of the house, except the casement windows, and had seized upon two large cherry-trees, and out of their spreading branches had built an evergreen arch, a shelter from sun and rain alike. There was a well in the centre of a tiny grass-plot, with chain and windlass; the woodwork, green with age, matched the low ring of stone in which the well stood, coated with the daintiest of mosses in all the shades of green and grey. The spring was late, but the daffodils had opened since last Sunday, and the thorn hedges had mysteriously covered themselves with bits of curled and crumpled bloom of tenderest green; the larks had also arrived, and just now one of those prime musicians was overhead, shedding a rain of music over many fields, himself hidden in the light. A little contemptible winged creature, the laborious bee, as Master Auceps styleth him, was out in full force with all his

family, and though he could not compete with the divine ditty of the invisible songster, his lowly hum had an earth-charm all its own.

Balthasar stood resting on his elbow against one of the trees, and took in the garden. Simple as it was, it had for him an unspeakable charm, a delicious attraction; there were in it health, sweet sanity, cool serene natural poetry and prose, miracle and law, divinest of ethics, and truest of religions—something, too, of the pathetic, in its lowliness and modesty and low esteem. “In the bower in the back-garden! Fittest of all places in which to find one’s love. I wonder shall I find mine here? If not, I am apt to think it is hidden beyond all finding. I must try and find it—in her! I will remember that she loves the organ,” murmured Balthasar, apparently to a half-open daffodil in his hand. He moved forward slowly, halting every few steps to explore some mass of evergreen which looked like a masked arbour. At length, near the far end of the garden, he came quite unexpectedly upon a short straight path, covered with the white ground rock of the lead-mines. His glance followed this path to its termination, and then he halted. There was the ivy-covered bower, and within sat Ruth with her head bent, and a closed book on her lap. He waited for some moments, then he coughed, but the girl did not stir. She was fast asleep.

“She expected Balthasar Phythian—one of the Phythians of Cottersley—would wait upon her with an offer of his hand and fortune, and she is so excited that she—goes fast asleep! She is evidently a girl of some originality. Shall I withdraw for ever? Alas! Jano is a lioness in the way. Shall I scrawl my vows upon a leaf of my pocket-book, and deposit them at her feet and retire? Alas! there are such things as vagrant winds and thievish jackdaws, and they have no sense of property. Yet it is cruel to wake her”—a cough—“outrageously cruel to wake a girl up simply to ask her to be one’s wife.” A louder cough. “Yet one cannot propose to a girl when she is asleep.”

Tiny insects with wonderful wings, the first of the season, were bobbing up and down in the sunshine, as if suspended from the sky by invisible elastic. One of these, more humorous or adventurous than its fellows, made a sudden leap into the jaws of death, and plunged madly down Balthasar’s throat. Now he began to cough in earnest and to some purpose; the blood came into his face, the tears into his eyes, while he scraped and rasped and roared to dislodge the “wee beastie” from his trachea. All thought of Ruth vanished, while he bent down with his hands on his knees and gave cacophonous battle with the intruder. The conflict ended, he raised himself erect, and feel-

ing blindly for his handkerchief, brought it to his tearful eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Phythian, are you ill?" enquired a soft voice at his elbow.

"Ha! you are awake at last then, Miss Penelope," said Balthasar. His voice seemed to tremble on the verge of a cough, and he held his handkerchief in front of his face, as though he had been crying.

Altogether, it was rather comical, thought Ruth. "Was I really asleep, then? I am quite ashamed you should have found me so. The sun was so warm, and Tennyson always puts me to sleep and gives me the sweetest of dreams," said Ruth, a little timidly, but with sufficient self-possession to choose her words. She felt she owed so much of good-breeding to Mr. Phythian of all men.

"I am very glad you could sleep. I think I envied you. Are you fond of Tennyson?" said Balthasar, recovering his normal composure, and stowing away the ridiculous handkerchief.

"Yes; the little I have read of him makes me think I should like to read all he has written."

"It is a blessed thing to be a Tennyson, to be able to write something that stirs the fancy and enriches the sentiment of every sweet girl and woman in the land. I bethink me that he says somewhere—In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love. It

is springtide now, Miss Penelope," said Balthasar, in a low voice, while he felt quite pleased with his own fluency.

The thing after all was not so dreadful, if it kept on as smoothly as it began. Indeed it was really pleasant to sentimentalise with a sweet sensible girl like Penelope.

"Whose 'Fancy' was it, please?" asked Ruth demurely, with a softly rising colour in her face.

"A young man's—ah! I see a point there. You think the world would have smiled if the poet had said—A middle-aged man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love? But that is due solely to the word 'lightly.' A middle-aged man should do nothing lightly, especially in love-matters. I hope you do not think me frivolous? I am getting perilously near forty."

"Oh no, Mr. Phythian, I do not think you are frivolous," said Ruth, with a soft laugh. She added, "But I think you bear your age well. When I am forty, I shall feel myself an old woman."

"Some women at that age are old; they are the women whose youthfulness adds no additional charm to life. By the same token, Miss Penelope, when you are forty you will be as a flower in full bloom."

"Now I know what flattery is. Why do you call me Penelope?"

"Because every one else calls you Ruth. We like

our own little private garden better than the finest of public parks. Yet I like the name Ruth, and the quality. I am here to-day because I would no longer be Ruth-less."

The girl cast her eyes down, while she blushed, and seemed to draw away from her companion.

Balthasar looked at her curiously for some moments, and then he said, "I know a man very much of my age and make-up. His family is not among the lordly oaks, nor yet the humble currant-bushes. He is a sort of walnut-tree, or possibly not unlike one of these large-boled apple-trees whose dignity is as genuine as its quaintness. He has money enough to keep a lady in luxury. He is a bit of a scholar, a bit of a philosopher, a bit of the man of the world, and a bit of a recluse. His worst enemy never impeached his moral courage or his truthfulness. His friends say flattering things of his temper, for which they give him no credit, however—attributing everything to nature and nothing to grace. This is unjust; it is the bitter blending with the sweet. Now, if this man were to come and say to you, 'Miss Penelope, I need a wife, and you certainly ought to be charged with some man's happiness. If you will take me for better for worse, I will keep only unto you until death us do part. Faithful in service, affectionate in sentiment, I will identify your happiness with my honour, and will make it the business of my life to preserve

both inviolate.' Tell me, if he spake thus to you, would you incline your ear graciously unto him, and give him of the sweet honey of hope?"

He stood before her with uncovered head, and with an anxious look in his eyes and upon his face, waiting for her reply. Was he in love with the girl, who stood with bowed head and burning face, a piece of maiden grace and sweetness and melody? Half an hour earlier he would have answered for himself with a truthful negative. But just now he would have declined an answer, from motives of doubt as much as of delicacy. Somehow his oblique wooing of the girl had reacted upon himself, and had suddenly begotten within him a new, a quite new, and almost painfully delicious sensation. By some subtle magic, Penelope had become transfigured in his eyes. She was no longer his ironical lady of the mill; merely a sweet intelligent girl, with instincts and tastes decidedly superior to her station. All this realism had left her now, and she was enveloped in that mystic medium that dissolves or interpenetrates the common sheath and mask of our humanity, and discloses the angel or the goddess in the woman or the girl.

Balthasar gazed at Ruth in silent wonder. Whence had come so swiftly, so mysteriously, the strange beauty, the ineffable sweetness, the divine mystery, the strong

passionate charm, the semi-religious, semi-voluptuous enchantment that seemed hers, inalienably hers, by the same beautiful law of propriety that justified the loveliness and fragrance of the rose? Surely, he thought, this was the love of which he had often read, at which he had often smiled; sung by poets, because it was a form of madness peculiar to their genius; written about by novelists, because inferiors love to imitate their superiors, though they are only equal to their follies and defects. He was neither poet nor novelist, yet already he had accepted their theory, and was prepared to defend their mad gospel of love, with its miracle of transfiguration. Was it really new-born love? Ah me! how glorious, how loveable she did look! And yet all this time she said not a word. He seemed to have been looking at her, as in a vision, for half an hour, while in reality it was ninety seconds at the most. He drew near to her. What he would have given just to touch her lovely white fingers! But he dare not. The splendid barrier of her maidenhood seemed like a protecting hedge of divinity, and to touch her even in reverence savoured of offence.

Of a sudden she raised her head and met his gaze bravely, as she said, "Mr. Phythian, I know from experience how sweet is the honey of hope, and I would not lightly rob man or woman of it. But we cannot give what is not ours to give. I should have no hope,

on my own behalf, for him, and therefore I could give him none."

"I hope you do not mean all you say?" said Balthasar, with an odd mental sensation of falling from a great height.

"I think I do. I am sure I do. Only I should have said besides, that I was not ignorant of the very, very great honour the gentleman did me. I could not be less than grateful, less than proud. I think, if a girl were what she ought to be, such a thing would never cease to be treasured in her memory. But I—I meant what I said," answered Ruth, disdaining not to allow the womanly pity of her heart to show itself unveiled in her eyes.

Balthasar gave a deep sigh.

"You think he would be too old?" Ruth shook her head.

"Too odd?" Another shake of her head.

"Too set in his ways?" Another shake.

"Too matter-of-fact and unsympathetic?" Another shake.

"Would he be precisely the kind of man you would not like for a husband in any case?" Ruth gave him a splendidly frank look as she replied,—

"No, decidedly not, Mr. Phythian."

The tone was worthy of the words, and both were worthy of the nobly frank glance. It was the best thing in the line of compliment that had ever befallen Balthasar Phythian. It was what any man might have felt the richer for having—an added touch of honour and nobility.

Balthasar bowed low his acknowledgments. There was a short silence, which was broken by Balthasar saying, "I have no wish to trespass on forbidden ground, Miss Penelope; but I would rather trespass than lose my way. Will you forgive me if I ask you to give me a clue to the state of your mind? Could you, without paining yourself, tell me why the case would be hopeless?"

"Oh, please don't ask me! It is a secret, and I could not tell you unless——" she paused.

"Unless I promised to keep it? Ha! I begin to see light. I am too late, methinks. Miss Penelope, Balthasar Phythian never yet betrayed a trust."

"Oh, I am sure of that!" cried Ruth.

"I am less satisfied than ever, though. As a rival, he is naturally the wrong man for you. He is a villain, and will make your life a curse to you. I must know who he is, that I may slay him. Then I gather, since it is a secret, that your father knows nothing about it. He would hardly have talked to me as he did, had he

known that your affections were already engaged. You make me miserable, my child!"

My child!—what a paternal touch for a hopeless lover! They both felt the touch. It was not unlike a slight shock of electricity. It was unpremeditated, involuntary, and genuine; and though it jarred, it did not repel. On the contrary, it seemed to call into existence a bond of sympathy exactly adapted to their natures, without fretting and galling. Odd, very odd—life is odd—but true. That one word *child*, uttered spontaneously, not disavowed, but left to stand uncorrected, wrought a change of mental attitude in both man and maid, such as might not have been reached after long and strenuous effort. Their glances met, and each made to the other a silent confession that the new-born truth was recognised and accepted.

"It is better so," murmured Ruth, giving him her hand, while her eyes filled with tears.

He did not ask, and she had no need to explain, *what* was better so, or *why*. This was transformation number two. *Wen Gott betrügt, der ist wohl betrogen!* When the gods are merry they will have their joke, willy-nilly. They passed into the bower, where Ruth seated herself, but Balthasar remained standing. He became lost in thought. Ruth watched him for some time, and thought he had a beautiful face for a man. Suddenly he looked at her and said, "I do not know

what Jano will think—or say—or do. She will probably wish that she could put me in the corner like a naughty boy, or send me to bed without any supper. Don't you think you could explain matters better than I could to her?"

CHAPTER XV.

A CONSPIRACY.

"I AM sure I do not know. You seem to think she will be very disappointed. Did she really wish it?" asked Ruth, with a distinct accent of doubt in her voice.

"I assure you there is not the smallest doubt on the subject," answered Balthasar.

"You mean she raised no objection?"

"To be perfectly frank, Miss Penelope, it was Jano's idea from first to last."

"Not your own?" Ruth's eyes were wide open now; seeing which, Balthasar thought it might be as well to hedge a little.

"Jano, you know, is more fertile in ideas than I, but perhaps is not quite so practised in conduct. She furnishes the idea, and I work it out. You laugh—at least you look as if you were going to. But I assure you it is a capital arrangement. I sometimes think if it were carried out on a large scale, and loyally, the world would be less of a jumble than it is."

But Ruth was not thinking of the big world at all. All the vitality of Balthasar's theory was run into his

application of it to herself. In the matter of wife-seeking, for instance, it did seem strange for Balthasar to follow not his own initiative, but that of his sister. She would like to have put a number of questions on the subject, which was as attractive as it was odd. But what impressed her most was the idea that Janoca, the sweet and stately, the dignified and gracious Janoca Phythian, had actually chosen her as fit and worthy to wear and bear the Phythian name and honour. People not infrequently entertain and consort with ideas which occasion no friction or heart-burning, so long as they remain personal, private, and unembodied. But let them once become incarnate in speech, and they stand a good chance of encountering the cold shoulder, if not the contempt and scorn of their former hosts. But Ruth Boden would have stood bravely by her private thought just now, even had it been cast into the rough and hard mould of speech. That thought was this: "In none of the finer, richer, truer senses of the word, am I a lady like her. But she must believe that I would be if I could; that I love ladyhood as the pure stuff of womanhood; that I would rather be a real lady poor, than a duchess rich and vulgar. Not title, not genius, not learning, not saintship, is worthy to unfasten the shoe-latchet of the Real Lady. And yet she thought me worthy to be her brother's wife!!!" From which it is plain that Ruth had both an exalted and refined

conception of ladyhood, and a noteworthy prejudice against the vulgarisation of that loveliest of lovely words—Lady.

And if it were not ridiculous, and a sign of utter incapacity to appreciate contemporaneous facts, one might be tempted to wish that so long as *the fact* of ladyhood exists, the term LADY might have been saved from the base soil and smirch of popular usage.

Said Ruth, "I should like to tell her how proud I am that she thought me fit to be—anything to her. I shall never forget it."

"I have long had a suspicion that Jano was no fool. I know it for a certainty now. But you have not answered me yet. Will you tell her?"

"Oh, I wish I could say I would! but I don't know how I could. I should have to tell her—everything."

"You may trust her. She is as true as steel."

"I am sure of that, but—oh, I'm afraid I am a wretchedly selfish girl! But I have my own trouble before me, Mr. Phythian. I tremble to think how father will take it when he knows," said Ruth, while the tears rushed involuntarily to her eyes.

"Nay, nay, you must have no trouble on that score. Leave that to me. I'll tell him that the match is off—that we do not suit each other. He will understand that a girl is not obliged to take a man old enough to be her father. Come to think of it, the idea is ridi-

culous. What right has an old fogey like me to aspire to sweet eighteen? I am ashamed of my impertinence, and I will tell him so."

"But I can see he has set his heart upon it. And I am not surprised at it. He will want to know why I have dared to throw away such an honour; and I cannot tell him."

"Tut, tut! an honour! Why not let the cat out of the bag at once?"

"Oh, Mr. Phythian, you don't know! He seems to hate him. I think he would rather see me dead than attached to him."

"That sounds very shocking, Miss Penelope. It makes things look serious. Won't you tell me who it is?"

"It is my cousin, Abel Boden."

"What! the picturesque young blacksmith?"

"Yes."

"Well, well, well! I have always taken an interest in that young fellow; he always brings back memories of Italy. And I hear he is no common man: quite a naturalist, isn't he?"

"Yes. He is wonderfully clever, and so good and noble. But father can't forget the quarrel he had with his own brother, Abel's father, years ago."

"So I understand. The miller has got a bad name through that business. People cry shame upon him for his treatment of his own brother's child."

"I know, I know; but father doesn't see it in that light. No girl could have wished a better father than he has been to me. And I tried so hard not to care for Abel, for father's sake. But it is of no use; we have loved each other from childhood," said Ruth, and the confession put her modesty to the defence of a sweet blush.

"Dear me! what a wise owl I must have looked in your eyes! Ah, well! in this matter I am going to stand by both of you. With your permission, I will just think it over a bit, alone."

So saying, Balthasar stepped from the bower, and promenaded slowly up and down the short white gravelled path in front. Presently he halted before Ruth, and said—

"Miss Penelope, we must kill two birds with one stone. Your bird is your father. My bird is Jano. The truth is, I do not want Jano to know how things have gone with us two."

"Why?"

"Well, one secret deserves another. She is determined to get me married by hook or by crook. I cannot exactly tell you her reason, except that it concerns the future disposition of our joint property. If you

could have had me, it would have been all right. But I do not want to try again. Now, could not we manage between us to hoodwink both of them? They conspire against us; why should not we conspire against them?"

"I don't see how we can."

"It is easy enough. Suppose we give them to understand that, while we are not engaged to each other, we do not absolutely hate each other—that we have a sort of understanding with each other. You can easily explain matters to the picturesque gentleman, cannot you?"

"Oh yes; but——"

"But what?"

"We should be telling an untruth."

"That is the rub, Miss Penelope, I know. But I would do the bulk of the romancing; and I think I could do it cheaply, so to speak. I mean I would not deal much in the genuine article. I would avoid the costly article of falsehood pure and simple, and go in for cheap but effective imitation. A few white lies mixed skilfully with a few half-truths, and we are delivered out of the hands of our enemies. Indeed I do not see how otherwise I can avert your father's anger."

Nor did Ruth. Likewise, she failed to grasp the real truth of the situation. Not on his own account would Balthasar have veered a hair's-breadth from the truth—Jano the terrible, and Matrimony the awful, not-

withstanding. The miller's almost rancorous hatred of Abel was common knowledge. For some few years it had lain sluggish and dormant, and some people opined that it had eaten away its own heart, and had died for want of sustenance. But since the day of the sale of Jack Wragg's place, and the coming of the new smith, these sanguine people had had occasion to change their opinion.

Hate will hibernate like a bear. Deprived of opportunity, like the famous grains of wheat in the pyramid, it will hold its vitality against time with invincible patience and miraculous endurance. Hate will do anything but die: considered as an illustration of the scientific doctrine of natural selection, its hold on life is highly suggestive. There are germs which trouble the soul of the experimenter who would like to demonstrate the truth of Spontaneous Generation. They refuse to be killed. He may boil them, he may burn them, but he is never absolutely sure that they are dead. These are the molecules that constitute the physical basis of Hate in the human organism.

The miller had assimilated his full share of these unloving atoms, and their activity of late had been unequalled. How they would dance and pirouette, gyrate and swing, toss and tumble in atomic madness, should the miller by evil chance light on Ruth's secret! It was a commotion too fearful for Balthasar to contemplate

unmoved. Some time, of course, the miller would have to learn the truth; but not at present, while his hate was new-blown towards Abel, and his hope for Ruth was flowing like a full tide.

"I think it is our best way out of the difficulty. It will be awkward for you at times, I fear. You must try and see the humorous side of it. I think it will be a capital joke. Be brave, and all will come out right," said Balthasar, when Ruth, after considerable hesitation, had agreed to his proposal.

"Am I a very naughty girl?" Ruth enquired, as she gave him her hand at parting.

"No, not very. You are just naughty enough to be nice."

"Suppose Abel should object?"

"Is he a jealous fellow?"

"No," answered Ruth, colouring; "but still he might object."

"Then you must turn him over to me. I will manage him. Hei! what a comedy I have put my hand to! If Jano only knew! But there, if she will trust me with ideas, she must accept my embodiment of them. *Ich hab' gethan, was ich nicht lassen konnte.* Now I will to your father." He raised his hat, bowed in grand style, and left Ruth alone in the bower in the back-garden.

She remained there until Jane came and announced

that tea was ready and the miller was asking for her; then she went in, full of fear and trembling. The miller was unusually quiet, and sat the greater part of the tea through without saying anything; nor was Ruth inclined to break the silence. At length, however, the miller remarked, "Anyhow, he is a queer kind of man. I can't quite get the hang of him; can you?"

"Whom do you mean, father?" asked Ruth, a trifle nervous.

"Who? Why, Mr. Phythian, of course."

"Yes, he is a bit peculiar. I think it takes time to understand him."

"That's true. Yet I gather you understood one another to-day, eh?"

Ruth flushed crimson. "Yes, I knew what he meant; but that is a different thing from understanding him as a man."

"Happen you'll have time for that when you are his wife." Whereat Ruth bent her head, but made no answer.

"Thinking it over, I'm none so sure but what you did the right thing, Ruth. It's as well to hang back a while. Men are much of a breed all through. They would rather a girl ran from them, so be that she lets them overhaul her at last. It's a mighty fine thing for you, my lady, and I hope you will play your cards well. Let there be no fooling, no dilly-dallying. Watch your

opportunity, and when it comes use it. He won't be content with things as they are for long, you may be sure; though he seems well pleased with his headway so far. But don't carry the thing too far. When the time comes, close the bargain, name the day, and then thank your stars that you had a father with wit enough to count a pile of schooling-money as bread cast on the waters. Come and give me a kiss, lassie," said the miller, pushing back his chair from the table.

Ruth came round the table and kissed him.

"You don't look very gladsome, considering the luck you are in. What is it, lassie? Fretting about leaving your crusty, rusty old dad? You won't grow too proud to know him when you're the fine lady, shall you? Well, cry it out, lass. It's a woman's way when she's o'erjoyed."

Ruth's head was upon his shoulder, as she stood behind him, weeping bitterly. Oh, if she could only have opened her heart to him just for once! Yes, he loved her, fiercely, passionately, sometimes angrily: he clung to her desperately; he had nothing else to cling to. But he never loved her as her nature cried out for—in such wise that her heart could open and take him in, and feed him with its secret life of joy and sorrow. Into her inner real life he had never penetrated, never thought of penetrating. Confidence demands confidence. His own interior life was a *terra incognita*, a

world shut up, sealed, guarded, unspeakable. Maybe this accounted for the fact that parent and child lived lives apart as the North Pole from the South Pole. When Ruth had done sobbing, the miller rose from his chair, and got his hat and stick for a stroll. At the door he turned and said—

“He said something about keeping it quiet for a while. I’m not going to brag about it, nor yet put a gag in my mouth. A friend can bide his time; but if I should run across one of the other sort, and I thought he needed a choke-pear, happen I should let drop a word.”

It would seem that the miller was not counting on a white crow or a black swan when he contemplated the possibility of encountering one of “the other sort.” For in the space of four or five days it was the one theme that held all tongues, how that Gentleman Phythian was “sweet” on Ruth Boden. In the lead-mines of Yewdle Brig, in the stone-quarries of Potter’s Carr, among the marble inlayers of Chaughford Nick, among the silk-weavers of Ribble Moor, in hill hamlet and in vale village, men and women found something unusually flavorful in this piece of gossip. It was all owing to the personality of Balthasar. For miles round everybody knew him or knew of him. A certain piquancy, a certain tinge of romance, clung to him; he was always spoken of with respect, seasoned with a

dash of the awe that attaches to mystery. And now at last the Romantic Bachelor was entrapped, like his ordinary unromantic brothers, in the net of feminine wile and charm. That it would be an ordinary courtship and an everyday marriage, no one pretended to believe. It would be distinguished and made extraordinary by something or other, without doubt—by something in keeping with his singular character.

Voe itself was deeply stirred by the news. Not for twenty years or more, since the day when they turned out, headed by the Squire himself, to try and find Abel Boden, the fugitive from justice, had the Voese been so charged with the social electricity of surprise, and sympathy running irresistibly to speech. The women gathered at one or two of the cottages which had been, time out of mind, their rallying-points, and at the little *omnium-gatherum* shop just below the smithery. Of old, the men had met on state occasions at Jack Wragg's smithery, under the spreading elm; but poor Jack Wragg was under the sod now. And the new-comer had brought new ways with him—ways that hardly went with the general fitness of things: even the anvil gave out a foreign kind of music nowadays, and certain patriarchal nostrils could not for the life of them detect so much as "th' same owd smell" from the frizzling hoofs of the horses. For obvious reasons, the men of Voe could no longer assemble in front of

the forge, and had to content themselves with the common room at the Nag's Head, and with the stone banquette that ran along the parapet of the bridge across the Scarthin, just where it curved itself into the village.

From the Nag's Head to the banquette, and from the bridge to the Nag's Head, backward and forward passed Am Ende, with increasing unsteadiness of gait at each journey. Being in great demand, his self-importance grew like a magic gourd. All he knew of the affair was what he had picked up from the gossips; but he was known to be hand in glove with the miller, and was accordingly credited with a first-hand knowledge of the great topic of the day. Am Ende was quite equal to the occasion. The moment he knew the part he was expected to play, he was ready to play it. Not a parliamentary whip, not a political manager during a party crisis, not a great caucus organizer conducting an extra-parliamentary agitation in the streets, could have carried himself with a finer air of secret and weighty knowledge. He talked incessantly, but less with his tongue than with his hands and eyes and feet. He gave a kick with his foot, after some one had made the announcement that Balthasar and Ruth were not to be married for a year, and the assembled company knew in an instant that the statement was moonshine; three months was nearer the mark than a year. An

hour later, half-a-dozen were prepared to swear that Am Ende had said there would be a wedding in three months. He had literally kicked it into them, nothing else. The foot, however, for the purposes of speech, is a clumsy stammerer compared with the nimble subtlety and dexterity of hand and eye. Am Ende gave names, dates, and places, spun yarns, propounded theories, contradicted statements, and covered innumerable suggestions and suggestors with beautiful ridicule—and this without the aid of half-a-dozen words. He thought the best place for his tongue was in his cheek. Words were dangerous things, and the miller was a dangerous man, reflected Am the wise.

The sage, with spirits a little elevated, was making anything but a bee-line—though when the Yankees call a straight line a bee-line, one wonders if they ever watched the line of a bee's flight—from the Nag's Head to the bridge, when he met Christopher Kneebone. Though Am Ende was born in sin and shapen in impudence, it was a sign that he was considerably market pert, and superior to the ordinary facts of life, when he accosted Kneebone with, "Happen you're glad o' th' news, blacksmith, being the miller's buzzum friend?"

"Let me see. I guess we have met before, and it wasn't in the daylight either," said Kneebone, in a significant tone.

Am Ende's jaw dropped suddenly, and he had a

sensation on the top of his head as if the red bristles that grew thereon were slowly erecting themselves. A ghastly grin of terror overspread his cadaverous countenance. "Happen you're mistook, guvner?" he said, abjectly.

"Possibly; but I thought I recognised your voice. However, that can wait. What's the news?"

"It's common talk that Gentleman Phythian is courtin' the miller's girl, Ruth."

"What! Phythian of the Chase?"

Am Ende gave a nod.

"It is something new then, is it?"

"Well, it's noo to them as hasna heard it afore. Lord! she'll be a tiptop leddy, and no great friend of mine neither. Some folks get their deserts, and go down; and some dunno get their deserts, and go up. And good day to you, sir."

Am Ende held his way to the bridge, while Kneebone walked slowly up the hill to the smithy, revolving in his mind Am Ende's curious doctrine that they only who "go down" get their deserts. For a blacksmith and an Englishman, Kneebone was oddly fond of ideas. The ordinary blacksmith has no more use for ideas than for Greek roots. A more uninventive, unimaginative craftsman does not exist; yet there are few crafts in which a little invention, and a little imagination, and an occasional idea would show to better advantage.

Abel was busy with the tire of a new wheel, under the elm-tree, when Kneebone came up.

"Abel, lad, leave the work alone a bit and come inside. I want to have a word or two with you," said Kneebone, passing into the shop. He went to the far end and sat down on a three-legged stool—what would Jack Wragg have said, if he had only known! He would have cried, with his incomparable irony, "Nay, mon, a three-legged stoo' is a poor weak thing. No-thing like a arm-cheer an' a sofy for a smith's shop." And, indeed, there were times when Kneebone felt so played out that he did actually drop work, and go into the house and lie down on the "sofy." But this was a secret known only to Abel, and guarded from the Voese as a shameful thing.

"Have you heard the news?" asked Kneebone, as Abel came and leaned against a pair of old bellows close by him.

"No. I've asked no one, and no one has told me. I've been too busy to find out."

"Perhaps it's as well you were. Can you trust me with a secret, lad?"

"What secret?"

"Isn't there something going on between you and your cousin Ruth?"

Abel gave a start, and the blood rushed into his

face. "Do you mean it's out, then?" he asked, in a low voice that sounded almost fierce.

"Nay, nay, not that. You are off the track, lad. As I gather, what they are talking about is that Gentleman Phythian, as they call him, is in love with the miller's daughter, and is courting her."

CHAPTER XVI.

A NATURALIST ON SPOOKS.

Abel laughed aloud.

"You don't believe it, I see."

"No, not quite. They've stuffed you this time, and no mistake!"

"If they have fooled me, it is only because they are fooled themselves. I learned it from Am Ende just now. It's what they are all talking about."

A frown showed itself on Abel's face for a moment or two, but it vanished as he broke out in laughter again.

"What are you laughing at, lad?" enquired Kneebone, who had never heard Abel laugh before to-day.

"Laugh? It's enough to make an owl laugh. When Mr. Phythian wants a wife, I'm thinking it won't be Ruth Boden he'll seek. For me, now, a village blacksmith, it would be quite a lift to marry the daughter of a rich miller. In a sense, and in a way, Ruth is a lady. I mean, she has been well educated, and is the opposite of a vulgar girl. But she is no lady in the sense

that Miss Phythian is. Gentles mate with gentles. It skills not a brass button how fine a girl she may be, Balthasar Phythian looks at no Voe girl."

"I know precious little of the gentleman; but I opine, from what you say, that he's a donkey."

"If he's a donkey, I've no ambition to be a horse."

"Is that so? I guess, then, he has looked at Ruth Boden. And when he was looking, like as not he forgot all about Balthasar Phythian, and thought only of Ruth Boden. I've seen her, you know. She is not a beauty, but she has a face and figure and carriage that would be quite able to bowl over a mature bachelor who was no donkey, and was willing and perhaps waiting to be bowled over. I've seen a lot of the world, lad; and what would strike Voe as being a nine-days' wonder, would be thought nothing of in the big world."

Abel made no answer, only laughed louder than ever. Kneebone watched him, and his face grew serious.

"You haven't said whether you could trust me with a secret yet, lad."

"Oh yes, I can trust you, Mr. Kneebone. But remember, it is a secret, and one which would bring no end of trouble if it got out."

"My lad, I've heard a lot of secrets in my time.

Some of them would make you open your eyes, and others would make your heart grow sick. Talk about novels and romances, lad—not but what I'm desperate fond of a good story—but novels, lad, they're milk and water, skim-milk and water, compared with the true tales of life. But there! that can wait. You love her, do you?"

"With all my body and with all my soul!"

"Well done, lad! That's an answer worthy of a king. She loves you ditto?"

"I believe she would say so. Anyway, I believe it of her."

"You don't doubt her a bit?"

"Not an atom."

"Suppose Mr. Phythian did really make her an offer, what do you think she would do?"

"I don't know. I never thought of such a thing. But she would say No, of course."

"And the miller?"

"He would jump at it, like a fish at a fly."

"Then he would want to know why she said the gentleman nay, wouldn't he?"

"Yes, if he knew of it."

"And he would know of it if Mr. Phythian were the suitor. Would she tell the miller her reason?"

"Tell the miller? If he guessed she even spoke to me, he would shut her up in her room and keep her on bread and water for a twelvemonth. He hates me, without a cause," said Abel, with a deep sigh. He always sighed when he thought of the miller and his hate.

"Well, happen it isn't altogether without a cause. Seeking for causes, lad, you mustn't run along the grass. They are the roots of things, and they are apt to lie deep down, deeper than we can get with pick and spade. But, my lad, where there's smoke there's fire, and there's a lot of smoke about just now. Take my advice: waste no time, but see your lass as soon as you can, and just find out for yourself what's the meaning of all this gossip and chatter. There is something in the wind, you may be pretty sure. Maybe she's on bread and water this blessed minute."

At this Abel gave a start.

"Of course you've got a carrier-pigeon to act as post-man or -woman for you two?"

"Yes, I can generally get word to her."

"Then you had better go and throw the bird up without delay."

So Abel turned down his sleeves, put on his coat, and went out. Across the road, leaning against an orchard gate, was Am Ende, in conversation with Silas

Chalk. Before Abel came up to them they parted—Chalk crossing some meadows in the direction of a distant coppice, with a couple of dogs at his heels. Am Ende, with his back to the road, leaned over the gate and gave his whole attention to the retreating figure of the under-keeper and the frolicking of his dogs.

A little distance below the smithery was a steep sandy lane, that crossed the brow of the hill, and finally opened out on to a wide expanse of rolling ground, grass-covered, with jutting grey rocks, patches of heather, furze, and full of curious dips and hollows, and corresponding humps and hillocks. At the top of the lane, on the edge of the uplands, trim and snug in the centre of a garden, stood a small cottage, one-half of which seemed covered with honeysuckle as yet fast asleep, while the other half had been taken possession of by the quick climber yclept the Ramping Widow, whose myriad yellow eyes were already open. At the far end of the garden were kennels for the accommodation of ten or a dozen dogs: only about half of them were occupied just now, but their occupants, healthy young sporting-dogs, although not “matched in mouth like bells each under each,” spent their mouths from sunrise to sunset in cries tunable enough at a distance. Here lived Violet Chalk. She was baking bread, and had just put the two first loaves into the oven, when

of a sudden she stood in a listening attitude in the middle of the room. It was early, by a fortnight, for the cuckoo, who was, moreover, a shy bird, giving the open uplands a wide berth, being fond of thicket privacy and woodland shelter. Yet close at hand, as it were in the lane, she heard the unmistakable cry of the cuckoo.

"No, it can't be. Happen it's young Abel," murmured the woman, as the bird's notes came for the third time, true to the life. She unhung from the wall an old sunburnt billy-cock hat of her husband's: of velveteen, its original shade of light buff had changed into a deep amber. Putting it jauntily on her head, she went out, and down the garden walk to the wicket-gate. Her arms were bare; her dress was turned up in front and pinned behind; her white apron was tucked up on one side; she wore a pretty pink and grey striped underskirt, short enough to show her shapely ankles. With her amber-coloured hat, and her bright eyes, and her handsome face, and her picturesque "get up," she made a pretty figure as she leaned over the gate and looked down the lane. Close to her, by the hedge of budding thorn that bounded the garden, was Abel Boden. Violet Chalk laughed as she said:

"I reckoned it was a cuckoo that couldn't fly who'd

make a call in this lane. What's the meaning of your long face?"

"I must see Ruth this evening," answered Abel very seriously.

"Heigho! then you've heard the silly gossip, I judge?"

"Yes; and I must know what it means."

"Means? Moonshine! I heard it yesterday morning; and do you think, if it hadn't been moonshine, I shouldn't have been down at the mill in no time? But there! you men are all alike. You think a woman isn't to be trusted farther than you can see her. There's my man—if he only knew you were here talking with me all alone like this, he'd crack his skin with jealousy. If you got your deservings, there's precious few of you would have the chance of calling a woman your own. How did you know Silas wasn't at home?"

"I saw him going towards the bear coppice, as I came along."

"Well, I'm glad your boldness didn't shame your wit. When you want to see me, don't you ever forget that you've got a brother in jealousy, and his name is Silas Chalk."

"You shall never suffer through me, Violet. And as for thanking you for your kindness to me and Ruth, I——"

“Nay, I want no thanks. If I couldn’t stand by Miss Ruthie at a time like this, I should think myself a mighty poor stick. I’ve got some loaves a-baking now, and when they’re done, I’ll just put on my things, and run down and—listen! there’s somebody—there! I just saw his head. To the top of the lane, quick, and see who it is!” exclaimed Violet Chalk, giving Abel a push with her hand.

Abel was off like a deer. A hundred yards or so brought him to the top of the lane that dipped steeply into the village; between the high banks on either side, he could see half the entire length of the lane. There was a well-known hawker with his donkey and panniers just heaving in sight; otherwise, the lane was deserted. Abel came back smiling.

“There’s the pedlar of Swaffwick and his ass, almost at the bottom. There’s nobody else about.”

“Happen eyes and ears both lied, but I doubt it. If it wasn’t Silas, I don’t care. And if it was, I—don’t care either. You’d better go now. If I don’t pass the smithy, you’ll know it’s all right. She will want to see Dame Betty Iperson this e’entide, I judge,” said Violet Chalk laughing, as she turned and went towards the house, with the carriage of a chastened coquette. In about an hour she left the cottage and went down Tyntack Lane, bound for the mill on the other side of

the river. There was a stone cow-shed near a gate, about half-way down the lane. As she passed the gate, a man peered at her for a moment through a large vent-hole in the shed. A minute or two elapsed, and then Am Ende issued from the cow-shed, and crossing the field, climbed to the summit of a bold head of land, that was crowned with some fine red-boled pines. Thence he could see the length of Tyntack Lane, and the Voe road down the hill and across the Scarthin, and the lane beyond that led to the mill; one of the mill ricks was partly visible, and the blue smoke from the homestead curling upward among the dark pines that covered the whole side of the hill. Am Ende seated himself with his back to a large stone, lighted his pipe and smoked leisurely, keeping his glance all the time on the figure of Violet Chalk, until he saw it turn up the lane to the mill, when it was hidden by the trees. Presently he put his pipe carefully down, curled himself up in the sunshine, and went fast asleep.

Dame Betty Iperson has very little to do with our present narrative, touching it incidentally once or twice only. But no chronicler of Voe and the Voese may so much as mention her name without halting for a moment to do her reverence. For she was of unknown antiquity—probably as old as the oldest annuitant on

the military pension-list. Her mother was a gipsy, her father was a charcoal-burner, and she was born some time subsequent to the Norman Conquest, on the top of a hill, on the edge of a wood. There was no house on the hill-top, or barn or cow-shed; but there was a kindly yew-tree with mighty drooping branches—one of those single-roomed palaces wherein primeval kings ate and drank, held court and war council, and cultivated the royal taste for noble architecture. Under this tree was Betty born, and under it she lived for the space of fifty years. Then she fell deadly sick, and so was manageable; the old Squire took her from under her own roof-tree, and put her in a wee nest of a cottage at the foot of the hill, between the wood and the river. But Betty would have gone back again to her dear tree, in spite of all the old Squire could do, had not nature come to his assistance and tamed her with the cruel cords of rheumatism.

She was a pensioner when the present Squire was born; she was a pensioner still: nobody ever thought she would die. She was a white witch, and could do a thing or two better left unsaid. To evil-doers and urchins she was a terror, and honest folk also paid her a fearful respect. Yet because her craft was white and levelled only against evil-doers, the popular sentiment concerning her was charitable and kind. She was the wise woman of Voe, and many a fortune she had told, good and bad alike, had come true. She knew the

properties of plants and their relations to bodily ailments, and had cured more than the doctors—there were two of them—who came to Voe had killed. Yet folk were shy of visiting, especially alone, the old, old woman of mysterious powers, whom Death itself passed by. Not so, however, Ruth, who seldom allowed a week to go by without paying Betty a visit, and never went empty-handed. Eggs, butter, cream, custards, tea, new bread and tea-cakes, all found their way into Ruth's dainty basket of blue and red and white and yellow Chinese straw. A dozen times had the old sibyl, "bow-bent with crooked age," tried to presage Ruth's future; but oddly enough, she always failed. Always she got to—

"Ye will be woo'd by a gentleman well-born and wealthy, but——" and there she stuck.

"Go on, Betty. But what?" urged Ruth, time and again.

"Nay, nay, childie; happen there's summat wrong. He's a gentleman well-born and wealthy, and he'll woo thee honestly, and ye two ought to mate. But I canna see it, I canna see it, childie. *And I wunna see aught else,*" muttered Betty, with determination. If she could not shape destiny, she could at least ignore it.

The after-glow of the setting sun had paled into delicate shades of pink, rose-colour, green, and name-

less tints of ineffable sweetness and softness, when Ruth set out from the mill, with some butter in her basket for Dame Betty, whose cottage was a good mile away. Ruth always went by the footpath that followed the course of the Scarthin within a stone's throw: first came two or three meadows of extreme fertility, being often flooded; then the path left the river-bank, and running to the left, entered the wood, and kept pretty close to the boundary-wall most of the way. Between the wall and the river was a long narrow strip of grass-land the length of the wood: there was something in the grass that made it specially toothsome to sheep at lambing time. In the same season the Scarthin had a trick of rising suddenly in the night, until it covered all the ground, and washed against the boundary-wall. In the morning mutton was scarce, and lamb scarcer; and four-footed Rachels, with bedraggled and bedrenched fleeces, stood making melancholy sounds, and would not be comforted.

Through the openings in the bushes, Ruth could see the lambs as she went along; once or twice she went to the wall, and stood and watched them. She was fond of lambs, as all good girls are, and in her time had been the happy possessor and tormentor of several pets; but of late years she had observed and deplored the fact that lamb nature had undergone a great and sad change.

It was no longer sportive and frolicsome, given to standing on its head and jumping all-fours, as it was in the old time, when her early picture-books were first made. If Ruth had only known that the Scotch gillie had lost his dry humour, and the Irish carle his merry wit, she might have wondered less at the mighty influence of the nineteenth century as displayed in the wiser but the sadder lamb.

Ruth seemed in no haste to get to the end of her journey; she stopped to look at the lambs, to admire the milch-cows, to gather wild flowers, to examine buds, mosses, trees, and rocks; also the industrious ants delayed her, and the conies feeding in the open glades. And always she was looking behind her, and listening for Abel's footstep or one of his many imitative bird-notes. Across the river, in the open, the eventide had deepened into twilight, which still lingered on the path; but darkness was gathering quickly in the wood, and seemed to overhang her as the ground to her left rose abruptly into a steep pine-clothed hill. "He will meet me coming back," murmured the girl to herself, quickening her steps.

Suddenly a slight sound from the wood caught her ears, which caused her to turn her head quickly, and then she stood stock-still and gasped, "Oh! Oh!" Not more than twenty feet from the path, with its root on

a level with her head, was the slanting trunk of a large oak-tree, centuries old. All its boughs had dropped off long ago, yet the grey and gnarled monster, covered with big bosses, was not dead. It was not much more than a shell, but it fought off death with fine courage, and every year threw out its challenge of slender green twigs on its highest top. There was a hole in its trunk larger than a man's head. Ruth was looking at this aperture when she was affrighted and cried "Oh! Oh!" For there in the uncertain light she beheld a hideous human face. Its gleaming eyes looked out from a mass of savage flame-coloured hair that covered the upper part of the face. Its mouth was wide open, and its tongue lolled out in horrible derision. Fascinated with horror, Ruth stood for some moments gazing at it with parted lips and dilated eyes. Then she dropped her basket, screamed out "Abel! Abel!" and fled like a wild thing back towards home. And towards her came Abel, fast as he could tear. He was some distance off when that cry of "Abel! Abel!" rang through the wood. In an instant he knew it was Ruth, and his heart gave a great sickening throb. He put his hands to his mouth, and all his breath went out in a fierce and weird-sounding owl-cry, that Ruth may know he was at hand; then he rushed forward like the wind. He saw her coming, halted, opened his arms, and folded them round her.

Then he glared about like an angry bull, but no enemy loomed in sight.

"My darling, my darling, what is it? Speak! what made you cry out?" he murmured, stroking the head of the sobbing and trembling girl.

"Oh, Abel, don't leave me! It was horrible—horrible."

"What was it? somebody dead in the way? a murder?"

"No; it was in the big oak—a hideous face lolling its tongue at me, through the hole there. Take me home, love, I feel faint."

"Nay, sweet; we're nigh the spring. Come and drink; it will revive you."

He led her to a spring with a wooden trough, that looked by daylight like a natural channel, so coated was it inside and out with exquisite greenery, summer and winter through. Ruth drank of the cold crystal fluid, and decided not to faint.

"Where's your basket?" asked Abel.

Ruth looked at her hands in a helpless, perplexed fashion. "I don't know. I suppose I dropped it."

"Then come along, and we will go and find it." But Ruth hung back.

Abel laughed lightly, and said, "You little coward! I am going to have a look at the big oak. I'm thinking there was nothing but your startled fancy."

"It will have gone, whatever it was, by now," objected Ruth, shuddering.

"Happen it will; but I shall know when I get there whether bird or beast or man has been there this evening. If nothing has been there, why, then, it was nothing but a—a spook, as Mr. Kneebone calls it. He means a boggart, you know."

"A boggart's bad enough, Abel," said Ruth, with due solemnity.

"A spook, sweetheart, is just what you care to make it. It may be a goblin, a ghost, a devil, an angel, a natural object distorted by your fear, a play of the fancy, a trick of the eye. Sweetheart, I've roamed all this country, woods and valleys, fields and moors, as you know, at all hours of the night, and I've seen dozens of spooks, and I—I don't take much stock in them. They're a set of beggarly impostors. And I'm thinking you've seen one of the gentry to-night."

"I will go," said Ruth, her natural courage reviving under the breath of Abel's brave scorn. In a few minutes they were opposite the big oak.

"Ha! here is my basket," cried Ruth, stooping to pick it up.

"That's right. Now for the tree. I can hardly see the hole now, Ruth."

"It has grown so dark up there," whispered Ruth, clinging tightly to her lover's arm.

"Never mind; I know exactly where it is. If I can't see, I can feel and smell. We'll soon settle this mystery," said Abel, going towards the tree.

CHAPTER XVII.

A CANDLE-END AND A PAIR OF EYES.

"You had better stand here. I shan't be more than a minute or two," said Abel, as they stood at the foot of the oak.

"Where are you going?" enquired Ruth, in a low frightened voice.

"Oh, not far; only up the tree. It's hollow, you know, inside, and I shall get in from the top. Luckily, it has a good slant, so that I can crawl along without dropping from top to bottom."

"Suppose—It—should be inside now!" gasped Ruth.

"In that case, one of us will come out quicker than he went in. Happen it won't be me either."

"Oh, Abel, if it's there, it's listening, and knows you are coming! And I'm sure it wouldn't stick at murder. Oh, don't risk it! Do let us go away."

Abel laughed out. "Go away from a spook! Nay, nay, sweetheart. If I once began giving in to them, they'd haunt me without end, hunt me out of the woods, turn my hair white, and drive me crazy. Run

from them, and they are wild bulls or ravening wolves; face them, and they are sheep—nay, geese. The only boggart I ever came across that stood his ground when faced was—an old grey jackass. Kiss me; you are my lass, and I would have you a brave one.”

“Forgive me, love. I will be brave. Now go, but be careful,” whispered Ruth, putting her mouth up for a kiss.

Then Abel vanished round the tree, and Ruth stood alone in the darkness. She was brave now. Maybe Abel would soon be in great peril, in deadly conflict, and would need all the help she could give him. Could she help him, if need were? What a silly question! Help him! Her arms were strong, her fingers steel, her nails weapons, fine-tempered weapons of war, that would hold their own against eagle’s talons or tiger’s claws. Woe to the man or beast or boggart on whom she fell foul, in defence of Abel! Perfectly cool, splendidly brave, she stood in an alert attitude, with clinched hands, parted lips, and eyes that would have sparkled had it not been so dark. She heard Abel climbing the huge trunk nimbly as a wild cat; then he entered its black cavernous mouth, and every sound ceased. It seemed as if the earth had swallowed him up alive.

Stood Ruth, breathless, expecting every instant to hear some awful groan, or shriek, or cry for help. The

moments were minutes, and the minutes hours; still all was silent as the grave. She put her ear to the tree and listened—not a sound. Perhaps there had been a struggle, and she had not heard it; perhaps he was already dead. Who could tell what was at the bottom of the tree? Possibly a bottomless hole; even the entrance to a cave where bad men assembled! You see, her imagination was getting the bit between its teeth. “I will go to him,” she said aloud, and her voice had that ring in it which sends a thrill through one—the divine accent of womanly heroism. She took a step forward. Just then a lighted match burned brilliantly above her head, in the opening through which the face of the satyr had shown itself.

“Are you all right, sweetheart?” It was Abel’s voice, thank God!

“Yes, love, yes, love; shall you be long?”

“I am coming now.”

Ere she could count a hundred, Abel was beside her. He took her hand, saying, “Come along, sweetheart. The sooner you’re at home the better.”

They regained the path, now cloaked in darkness like the wood, and moved towards Voe, which was down the river, in lover-like fashion. For a little distance nothing was said. Abel seemed disinclined to talk, and Ruth felt a wee bit afraid of learning the truth: questionless Mother Eve herself felt a wee bit afraid of

learning the truth about that mysterious tree that bore the brightest fruit in all Eden. But she ate nevertheless.

Said Ruth, "What did you find, dearest? Was it a spook?"

"No, sweet; I'm thinking it was no spook."

"What is it, Abel? Tell me why you speak in that voice?"

"I didn't know anything was wrong with my voice. There was nobody there; though it hasn't been empty all winter. Mice have been in it, and squirrels and bats, and——"

"Don't, Abel, please. You are putting me off. Tell me what it was."

"A man," said Abel, bluntly and almost savagely.

"A man! Oh! what does it mean?"

"That's what I can't make out."

"Perhaps it was a tramp."

"Didn't you know it at all, Ruth—the face, I mean?"

"No; it looked too horrible for a man's face."

"Because you were frightened, sweet. The knave! if I had him by the two ears only! Try and think: picture the face with the hair brushed away; push in that lolling tongue, shut the mouth, and lower the chin a good bit—for I'm thinking the head was thrown back for effect. If it wasn't so dark, I'd show you what I mean."

"Don't talk like that, dear one; it gives me the shivers. You could never look like that monster."

"I'm none so sure of that. But do as I tell you, and see if you don't conjure up a face you know."

For four hundred and eleven paces—Abel counted them—there was silence between the two; then Ruth suddenly gave a slight start. Abel felt it, for his arm was round her waist.

"Well?" he said.

"I'm not sure, but I fancy it reminds me of—no, I won't. It is not fair. It's only a fancy, and because I don't like him."

"Never mind; I'll christen him for you. I don't know who or what peered out upon you, but I know who has been in the big oak to-night."

"Who?" whispered Ruth.

"Am Ende. And happen if he doesn't am-end he'll come to a rope's-end soon," replied Abel, like Samson of eld running his wrath into grim humour.

"Are you sure it was Am Ende?"

"Yes; I'm as sure about it as if I'd seen him there with my own eyes."

"Tell me about it, Abel, won't you?"

"Well, I went down inside very carefully, so as not to disturb things. The first thing I found inside was a smell of tobacco. Now spooks don't smoke, or at least I never heard say that they did. But Am Ende does."

"And plenty of other men too."

"I know; but never mind them now. My case against Am Ende is made up like a chain of a number of links. Separate they are nothing; hung together, and happen the like of them are what hang most men."

"I see now, dearest. Link one: a smoker has been in the big oak, and Am Ende smokes. Go on, love."

"I had my match-box on me of course, and as luck would have it, there was a candle-end in it as usual. I got a light and went to work. I found where the fellow sat down when he filled his pipe, smoked it out, and knocked out the ashes. When he pulled his tobacco out of his trousers-pocket, he pulled out at the same time some grains of wheat and barley and oats. I know our friend carries his tobacco in his trousers-pocket; I've seen him pull it out. He's nearly always chewing grain of some sort or other, and I'd bet a thousand to one he carries it in the same pocket as his tobacco. Outside of the mill, how many men in the place would have a grain of corn in their pockets if they were searched through to-night?"

"Link two: grains of corn dropped from the pocket," quoth Ruth.

Abel laughed as he said, "Link three I didn't find, because my light was giving out; but it is there to a certainty. With a good light I shall find here and

there bits of fine flour-dust off his clothes. Shall we count it?"

"I think not. It would be hardly fair."

"As you like. The ground at the bottom was clayey and not over dry. There were lots of footmarks; boots with big nails in them, not much unlike my own. The print of the right foot was perfect in half-a-dozen places. But there wasn't a single perfect print of the left foot to be found. Always the heel was defective; now and then there was a trace of it, but mostly there was no heel to the print of the left foot."

"That looks bad."

"Very bad, when we remember that the miller's man has got a catch in his left foot, and never leaves the mark of his heel behind him."

"Link three: left-heel mark unsatisfactory."

"The scamp, to frighten you, brought his thick crop of red bristles over the front of his face. I don't suppose he had a comb; he used his hands. Close to the hole where you saw him, a nasty cruel spike of wood sticks out; against it I bumped my head pretty hard. That seemed to say: if I can catch one, I can catch two. Just then my candle died out. You saw the match near the opening? Well, it showed me two human hairs. I've got them both safe enough, and their colour is——"

"Red?"

"Yes—a lovely fiery red."

"Link four: two red hairs."

"That is all. The chain is short, but don't you think it would bear the weight of our friend Am Ende?"

"Oh, Abel, what does it mean?"

Abel sighed, and shook his head. It was too dark to see his head, but Ruth interpreted his sigh.

"He must have heard me call your name!"

"Unless he has grown suddenly deaf, he must have done. But what brought him in the big oak? How came he to dare to do such a thing to you? The whole thing is a puzzle to me. Happen Mr. Kneebone will see through it, if I have a talk with him about it."

"Abel, this might be our last walk together," said Ruth, with a suddenness very well calculated to surprise her lover.

"Ha! how's that?" asked Abel, coming to a halt. He was thinking now of what he had almost forgotten in the excitement of the last forty minutes—to wit, the object of his meeting with Ruth.

"I can't help thinking that Am Ende is spying on us. Anyway, he knows enough now to rouse father, if he tells him."

"Odd way of spying—to put your head out of a hole and make faces at one! As for telling your father, I don't think he will, this time at any rate. I reckon

you frightened him almost as much as he did you, by the way you screamed. But what if he did? Your father will have to learn the truth some day."

"Yes; but not now. I don't know what he would do to me just now. I think he——"

"Ruth, why I wanted to see you to-night was to ask you—something. There's a report in everybody's mouth about you and Mr. Phythian of the Chase."

There was a pause of some length ere Ruth replied, "Yes, I know. Violet Chalk told me to-day. I never dreamt it was out. I think I feel it more for him than for myself."

"Oh, indeed!" said Abel in a low tone, and his arm fell from Ruth's waist as if it had been suddenly paralysed.

"Don't take your—I mean, don't wrong me, my love, even for a moment, by thinking me untrue to you. Oh, Abel, could you doubt me now?"

"I have not said I doubted you. I think you owe me an explanation. One woman is only half enough for two men. I'll share with none—gentleman or clo——"

Ruth's hand was on his mouth, and then her lips. And between her sweet honey-dew kisses she murmured—

"And I know one woman who will share only with one man, though he is quick to doubt her, when he

ought to know she would——” (a long, sweet, clinging, passionate kiss) “die for him!”

She put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him lightly and quickly back from her. It was a woman's repulse all over, a piece of sweet and delicately wanton irony. Only a fool would have misunderstood it to mean, “Go.” It meant—it always means—“Take me in your arms, if you dare, you—you—sweet—monster!”

Abel felt very much inclined to accept the dainty challenge, but he restrained himself. He had yet to hear what was the meaning of the village gossip; but whatever it was, it left Ruth's loyalty intact—of that he had now not the smallest doubt. Nevertheless, Abel had an instinctive knowledge of the fact that as there is a certain natural propriety that attaches to every conceivable situation in life, so every quarrel has its inalienable etiquette, and every reconciliation its proper punctilio. The Phythian rumour touched to the quick the honour of both himself and Ruth; and to give way to his impulse, and meet her sweet defiance with a lover's arms, before he had heard her formal statement, was to violate the true instinct of conduct. This sounds oddly precise—almost priggish. But Abel was no prig. Only his instinct along certain lines was as fine and accurate as were his organs of sight, and touch,

and smell. Abel took her hand, and as they moved on, he said—

“Sweetheart, if I had any doubt, you have driven it all off, and I’ll see that it keeps off in future. It isn’t a pleasant thing, though, for a man to know that everybody is talking about his sweetheart being courted by some other man. To be sure they don’t know you are my sweetheart.”

“I was so hoping you would not hear a word about it. Some day in the future, when—when we were always together, love, I meant to tell you all about it. It is a curious story, Abel, and I am not sure whether I did right or wrong. But you won’t blame me darling, will you?”

“Nay, nay, sweet; why should I blame you?” His arm stole round her waist again as he spoke; whereat the girl was glad, and gave a little wriggle closer to him, full of love and gratitude, and gave him her lips for a moment.

“I will tell you everything as it happened,” she murmured. And she kept her word, and told him everything as it had happened. When she had finished, Abel said—

“It is no mean chance, Ruth, that is offered you. I’m thinking that, hard as it would be, I have no good right to stand in your way. It isn’t as though there was a prospect of our marrying soon.”

"I can wait, darling; we are in no hurry to be married. As for you standing in my way, if we never saw each other again, the real obstacle would not be removed."

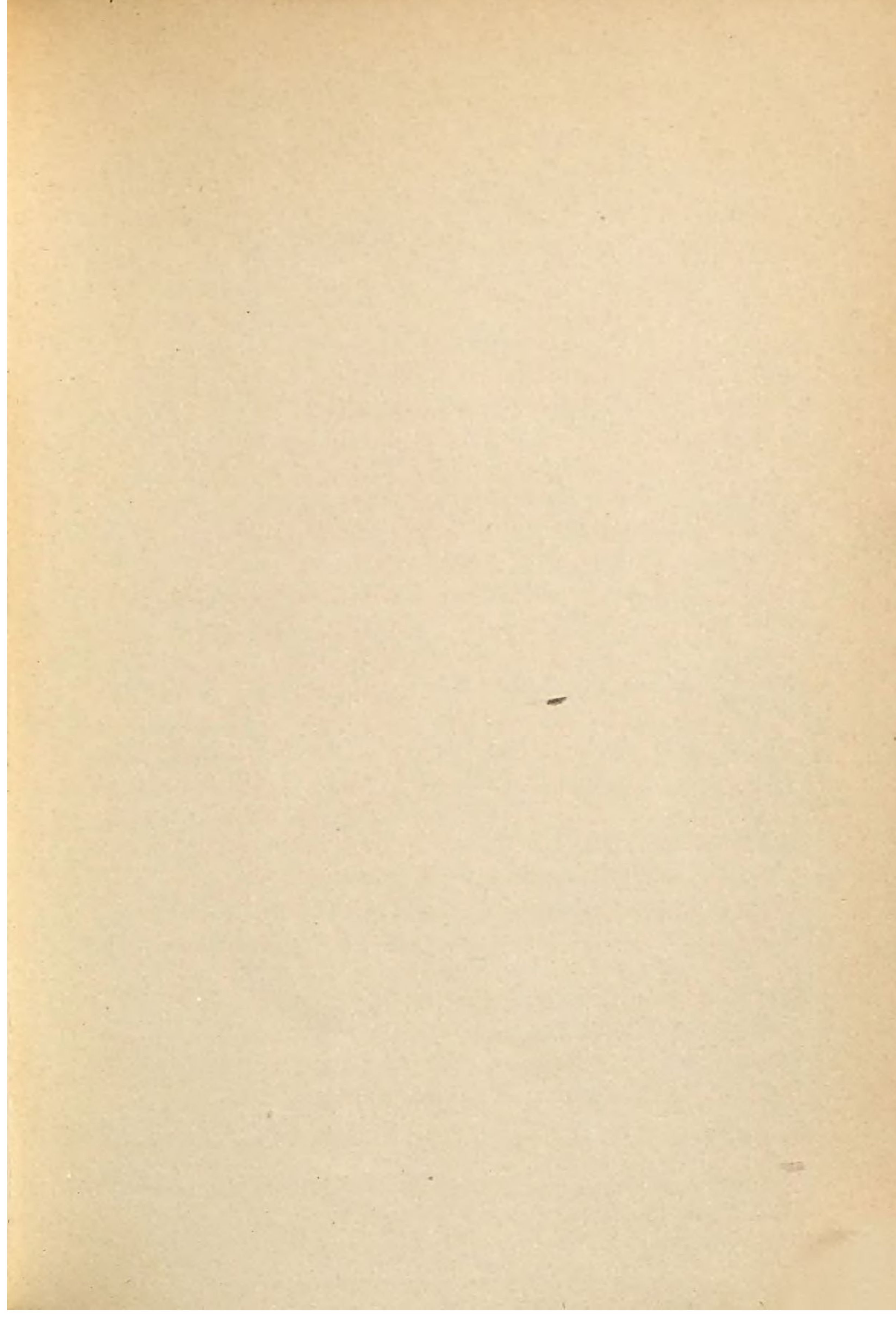
"What do you mean?"

"Only that you are my first, my true, my only love. Until that is killed, I am yours and yours only. My love is the blessed obstacle; and oh, Abel, what are twenty Mr. Phythians compared with you?"

"You darling! I will live only to make you happy," he murmured, as he clasped her in his arms. Here again his instinct of conduct was really admirable.

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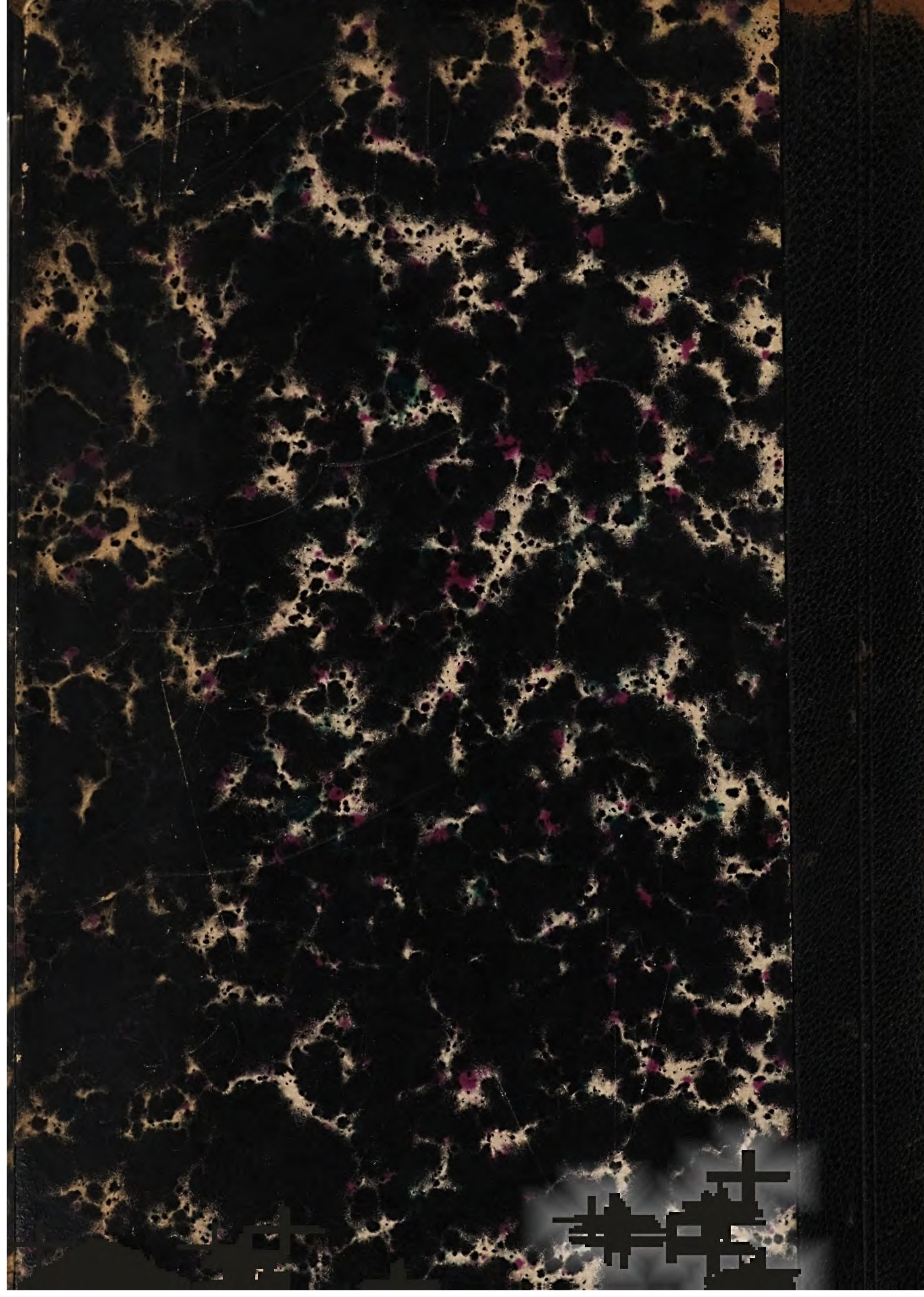
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